FREE BERLIN

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Bengi Akbulut

COMMONS

Bengi Akbulut is an assistant professor at the department of Geography, Planning and Environment, Concordia University. Her academic work is within the tradition of political economy and ecological economics. A significant component of her research is on economic alternatives, including commons/commoning, economic democracy and degrowth.

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Introduction

Recent times have witnessed the resurgence of the term commons, invoked from various different, and often radically opposed, positions. Some relate commons to efficient use and governance of resources, in a rather sterilised fashion, de-contextualised from the broader processes of capital accumulation, spread of markets and power relations. International organisations, such as the World Bank—in a move that (implicitly) acknowledges the destructive impact of the relentless spread of markets and market relations—have been emphasising the need for community-based management of the commons to ensure their efficient and sustainable use. Somewhat similarly, an increasingly popular approach posits the commons as a third way between the State and market, sitting side-by-side (peacefully) with them. This takes for granted that certain fields of the social economic landscape should be organised *via* the market (such as private production and consumption) and others by the State (such as public goods and services), but those arenas where the State–market duo is either ineffective or undesirable are commons to be governed by communities. On the other hand, social mobilisations all around the world, whether resistance movements, or concrete practices of alternatives, are increasingly framing their discourses with reference to the commons: defending, reclaiming and/or building them. These social mobilisations often adopt the term as a conceptual tool to help participants imagine non-capitalist ways of organising their material life and creating solidarity.

In its contemporary reincarnations, commons can be found to refer to a resource to be exploited, a group of people cooperating for their interests or forms of social relationships that constitute a need-based organisation of social economic life. Such uses of the term are undoubtedly tied to different approaches to and conceptualisations of the commons, and different understandings of the physical and social reality in which they are embedded, that often remain implicit in the narratives surrounding the concept. Critically discussing different approaches to commons and conflicts over them emerges as a crucial necessity.

In this chapter, I initiate such a discussion by critically reviewing the contributions of major schools of thought on the commons. While I start with an exploration of the literatures inspired by two canonical figures, well-known to ecological economists, Garrett Hardin and Elinor Ostrom, I will then turn to a much older tradition, Marxian political economy and the more recent reformulations of the commons within that tradition. I conclude with a brief consideration of potential ways to further the ecological economics agenda on the commons.

From Hardin's tragedy to Ostrom's community

The literature on the commons has long been influenced, if not dominated, by the (in)famous framework laid out by Hardin (1968) in his "The Tragedy of the Commons". This invokes the example of a pasture collectively used by a group of herders, whose income is directly and positively related to the number of sheep they graze. Every herder decides on the number of sheep they keep individually and there is no collective limit on this individual decision. The problem faced by each and every herder is thus deciding the number of sheep they keep in their individual herds. An individual herder captures the whole of the extra income (utility) from an additional sheep in his/her herd. However, the amount of available pasture decreases for all herders with such an addition, and the cost (disutility) of the intensified use of the pasture is shared by all herders, i.e. only a fraction of the disutility associated with the pasture's overuse is faced by the individual herder. That is to say, every herder is motivated to increase his/her extraction from the pasture without taking into account the costs associated with such an increase on other users. Since each and every herder goes through the same calculation and reaches the same decision, the total number of sheep that is kept collectively ends up being far beyond the ecological carrying capacity of the pasture.

Hence a tragedy is asserted to exist: the collective use of a resource by a group of individuals will lead to its inevitable overexploitation. An often-overlooked point here is signified by the precise choice of the word "tragedy". Hardin (1968: 1244) argues that, very much like the Greek tragedies, the outcome he foreshadows cannot possibly be averted within a context that combines freedom and commons: "[f]reedom in a commons brings ruin to all". Thus, the solution lies in dispensing with either the freedom or the commons, i.e. centralisation or privatisation. Against the image that he depicts, of helpless individuals trapped in their self- interested behaviour, Hardin claims that commons should either be managed by a central authority who will formulate and enforce regulations of use (e.g. the number of herders who can use the pasture, the number of sheep they can keep, the amount of grass they can use to feed their sheep), or that a regime of well-defined private property rights should replace them (every herder would have their private plots of pasture to graze their sheep).

However, both centralisation and privatisation have been demonstrated to be highly problematic policy prescriptions. The former suffers from issues related to operating a central agency in terms of the costs of its creation and maintenance, the nature and limits of its authority, the effectiveness with which it obtains information, and the potential of free-riding by its agents who would presumably collect information about use and enforce sanctions in case of trespassing. The latter faces the difficulties of assigning clear private property rights (difficult for non- stationary resources such as water), which paradoxically require a public institution for their maintenance and enforcement. Indeed, despite appearing as two extremes of the institutional policy space, both prescriptions share the central idea that institutional change must come from outside the social system of the commons and be imposed upon it.

Both the empirical validity of this narrative and its theoretical foundations have been criticised (e.g. Ostrom, 1990, Harvey, 2011). The argument has been made that what Hardin referred to was in fact an open-access resource and not a common-pool one (Dasgupta, 1996, Ostrom, 1990). Yet, the central dilemma that Hardin's piece focused on was still embraced in these criticisms; namely the dilemma between the difficulty of excluding users from extracting benefits from a resource

(non-exclusion of users) and the decrease in benefits that an extra user's extraction implies for the remainder of the group (rivalry in consumption). That many groups who use a common-pool resource find self-devised solutions to this dilemma, without resorting to either a centralised authority or private property rights, was the invaluable contribution made by the works of Ostrom (1990, 1994, 1999, 2005), but also by others such as Fikret Berkes (1989, 2009), Arun Agrawal (2003), and Robert Wade (1987).

Ostrom starts her seminal book *Governing the Commons: The Evolution of Institutions of Collective Action* by examining and subsequently refuting influential models of thinking on the commons—ideas placing the free-rider problem at the centre much like Hardin's "Tragedy"—and argues that the users of natural resources are in fact capable of changing the constraints (on engaging in collective action) that they face. Her argument refocuses the debate on how to enhance the capabilities of those involved and "lead to outcomes other than remorseless tragedies" (Ostrom, 1990: 7). This work and the subsequent literature it inspired thus mark the start of a broader shift in scholarly thinking about the commons and policy making. Research here shows not only the failure of the privatisation-or-statisation duo as the "only way" of managing the commons, but also illuminates the existing policy space, where interventions can be reoriented towards supplementing and maintaining the ways in which communities can successfully govern the commons, and have done so in the past.

Such research highlights the prevalence of cases where communities can indeed craft their own rules of access and enforce them through mutual monitoring to successfully avert the "tragedy". The case studies cited range from fisheries to forestry, from meadows to irrigation systems in various parts of the world including India, Philippines, Spain, Japan, Canada and the United States of America. Researchers have focused on identifying the conditions under which community management emerges successfully. Among the factors highlighted within this context, some are related to the specifics of the commons being studied—size, ease of monitoring, predictability of the benefit streams, importance for users—while others relate to the group of users—number, local knowledge, existence of collective-choice rules, prevalence of social norms, mutual trust within the group. Accordingly, the importance of the resource increases the payoffs associated with a co-operative solution to the management problem for the group and thus provides an incentive. A clearly defined and bounded resource implies that use and access can be more easily monitored, overuse can be more quickly detected and/or management rules can be more adequately adapted. Stronger norms of reciprocity and intra-group trust are identified as factors that enhance the users' ability to monitor and effectively impose sanctions on each other.

The rich tradition of scholarship produced within this vein holds immense value as it has effectively challenged and pushed the boundaries of the entrenched thinking on the commons. Perhaps the most critical and far-reaching contribution made by this line of work has been related to its unearthing of the assumptions underlying Hardin's tragedy narrative. The Ostrom School has replaced Hardin's conceptualisation, shared widely by mainstream economists, of the individual as an agent motivated (solely) by economic incentives, with that of the individual constrained by social norms and rules. The widespread recognition that individuals are social beings who act upon values, concerns, incentives and preferences that extend beyond narrowly defined economic self-interest, and that factors such as mutual trust, altruism, reciprocity and cooperation should become key elements in any debate on the commons, is a major accomplishment; especially given that the zeitgeist was Hardin's tragedy.

However, the Ostrom School's framework might actually have more in common with Hardin's approach than meets the eye. While their work is ground-breaking in many senses, it does not go far with respect to incorporating a vision of the social beyond an aggregation of individuals, or of a form of relationships that is not based on extraction of benefits between communities and commons. The methodological individualism that this approach shares with Hardin's narrative implies a notion of community that is the sum of strategically interacting individuals, albeit responding to both economic and social incentives, and an additional set of constraints (e.g. trust figures into their utility functions in the form of expected costs). Moreover, while the individuals are not narrowly defined *homo economici*, they still primarily relate in economic terms to a resource. Put in a vocabulary familiar to ecological economists, the valuation language that this analytic mobilises remains often implicit, but it is one of material benefits and not much else.

On the other hand, this approach—much like Hardin's—is largely silent on the ways that different dimensions of inequality and relations of power interact with the commons. In a related vein, the Ostrom School ignores the political-economic context within which the commons are embedded. In an era marked with expanding commodification, deepening of markets and expropriations of common wealth, the Ostrom School's approach lacks a satisfactory analytic to address many of the issues emerging around the commons today. A radically different, and much older, literature speaks precisely to this lack, namely, Marxian political economy and the notion of primitive accumulation.

From Marxian political economy to anti-capitalist commonings

In the last few chapters of *Capital Volume I*, Marx (1967 [1867]) locates the origins of and the conditions that enable capitalist accumulation, i.e. the existence of capital and wage-labour, within the enclosure of the commons. Accordingly, the process of capitalist accumulation presupposes the ready availability of a population divorced from their means of subsistence and thus forced to sell their labour power, and a surplus wealth that can be put to production as capital. Writing on land enclosures and usurpation of common property in fifteenth–eighteenth-century England, Marx illustrates how direct producers were divorced from their means of production by a variety of means, ranging from individual acts of violence to legal restructuring that removed the remaining barriers to the

expropriation of the commons (e.g. the Acts for Enclosures of Commons passed in Parliament). Accordingly, lands cultivated in common or held by communities—pastures grazed communally, forests from which communities had customary rights of use and extraction—were passed into the hands of landlords who now gained exclusionary rights over them. Through enclosures, commons were transformed into capital and 'immediate producers' were turned into wage-labourers;[1] this process, coined famously as "primitive accumulation", yielded the original surplus that enabled subsequent capitalist production. As Marx (1967: 500) states: "[t]his primitive accumulation plays in Political Economy about the same part as original sin in theology".

Although Marx did not explicitly attribute a specific temporality (such as pre-capitalism) to the concepts of primitive accumulation and enclosures, the Marxian tradition has often operationalised them in the context of geographies that capitalism has not yet penetrated and/ or periods predating the advent of capitalism. The concept has been reworked under different names, such as "accumulation by extra-economic means" and "accumulation by dispossession", to show that primitive accumulation is ongoing, both in the global North and the global South, in different forms with new twists (De Angelis, 2001, Glassman, 2006, Harvey, 2003, Midnight Notes Collective, 1990).

Perhaps the most notable among these is David Harvey's notion of "accumulation by dispossession". According to Harvey (2003), enclosures of the commons are not limited to a specific geography or temporality, but rather represent a strategy employed when capital accumulation slows down, hits barriers and/or is in crisis. Enclosing of the commons restores accumulation by opening outlets of investment (new venues of capital accumulation) and providing cheap input supplies. Analysing the rise of neoliberalism in these terms, Harvey mentions a series of processes as means of accumulation by dispossession, including the commodification and privatisation of land and the forceful expulsion of peasantry; conversion of various forms of property rights (common, collective, State) into exclusive private property rights; suppression of rights to the commons; commodification of labour power and the eradication of alternative forms of production and consumption; privatisation of public assets; colonial, neo-colonial and imperial asset appropriation (including natural resources); licensing of bio-genetic material under intellectual property rights; commodification of nature and culture; and the use of the credit system (Harvey, 2003, 2005). In a similar vein, De Angelis (2004) lists the imposition of intellectual property rights on culture and collective knowledge; depletion of the global commons due to commodification of nature and negative externalities such as pollution; commodification of cultural forms, histories and intellectual creativity; privatisation of public assets; and the reversion of common rights to State pensions, welfare and national health systems as forms of new enclosures.

The Marxian reincarnations of the concept of the commons (and enclosures), by Harvey and others, have effectively posited the notion in relation to capital accumulation. These scholars have revealed the ways in which the expropriation of commons is inherent in contemporary (as well as historical) processes of capital accumulation, and how commons have served, and continue to serve, as a support and/or enabling mechanism for capitalism. For them, the broader political-economic landscape, in which commons are embedded, is not to be taken as an exogenous variable but rather the founding ground of analysis. In this sense, the Marxian framework speaks to the ever-present tension between the process of capital accumulation and the commons, so conveniently skirted around both by the tragedy narrative of Hardin and the new institutional economics of the Ostrom School.

The works within this literature have also contributed to expanding the boundaries of conventional understandings of the commons to include social entitlements—welfare and pension systems—urban space, knowledge, and cultural and intellectual commons, most of which are now in our collective imaginary as intangible commons. They also revealed new forms of enclosure. The licensing of the genetic material contained in seeds, for instance, can be regarded as a fencing-off of an historical wealth of knowledge produced and held collectively. The land pollution due to negative 'externalities' similarly forms an expropriation of a portion of commons as an environmental sink for private use and barring its other uses. They are thus put on par with other forms of enclosures, such as privatisations of public and communal lands or of water resources. As such, the Marxian literature on new commons and new enclosures has provided an analytical toolbox for addressing some of the most pressing issues of our era, such as commodification of nature and culture, privatisation of natural resources, pollution and contamination, and urban gentrification. In doing so, it has illuminated the thread that ties these distinct processes together and provided a shared language and line of struggle to the oppositions against them.

Within the Marxian literature on the commons, the Autonomist Marxist approach epitomised by the works of Caffentzis (2010), Federici (2010), De Angelis (2001, 2006) and more broadly the Midnight Notes Collective (1990), among others, is particularly noteworthy for the purposes of this chapter. This vein of thought defines both the concepts of commons and enclosures in a rather distinct way from the traditional Marxian line, most of all due to its explicit reference to the set of social relationships in and around the commons. In particular, this approach conceptualises the commons as social spheres of life the main characteristics of which are to provide various degrees of protection from the market. That is, the commons form modes of social reproduction and accessing social resources that are not mediated by the market. They are non-commodified forms of fulfilling social needs such as obtaining social wealth and organising social production (De Angelis, 2004, Harvie, 2004). Enclosures, in turn, are acts directed towards the expropriation, fragmentation and destruction of the autonomy of social reproduction by the market (and/ or the State).

Seen this way, commons are no longer limited to shared forms of natural and social wealth, but include forms of relationships, networks, practices and struggles that provide (varying degrees of) access to means of material and social

reproduction outside of the mediation of the market. This conceptualisation goes beyond an understanding of commons as existing, pre-defined entities, and rather points to the amalgam of social relations and practices that produce and reproduce commons. Linebaugh (2008), and others, term this "commoning". Moreover, this emphasises not only the commons as process but also the particular characteristics of their constitutive social practices. Accordingly, commons are forms of non-commodified wealth to be used by all, sites of collective cooperative labour and regulated non-hierarchically. More specifically, then, commons emerge as spaces of social reproduction accessed equally by all, autonomous of intermediation of the State or the market, where reproduction and production takes place under collective labour, equal access to means of (re)production and egalitarian forms of decision-making (Federici & Caffentzis, 2014, De Angelis, 2006).

Within this context, time banks, urban gardens, land and urban squats, food coops, local currencies, 'creative commons' licenses and bartering practices, in addition to communal control and use of resources, emerge as contemporary forms of commons (Federici & Caffentzis, 2014). These examples represent practices in self-provisioning outside the logic of markets and, to varying extents, embody a collective form of self-reproduction. For example, urban squats are a form of commons to the extent that they organise their reproduction outside of State and market control and provide access to the means of such reproduction on a collective, democratic and egalitarian basis. Urban gardens serve as vehicles of regaining control over food production, regeneration of the environment and provision for subsistence. They are also venues of knowledge production, intergenerational transmission/exchange and of reproduction of social relationships, as well as a medium for the encounter of diverse cultural practices. Similar examples of commoning are: appropriations of unused plots of public land for subsistence farming by landless rural and urban women; local currencies and bartering practices that represent networks of exchange outside of market relations; and community governance of water through committees, such as those set up in Cochabamba, Bolivia (Dwinell & Olivera, 2014, Federici, 2011, Federici & Caffentzis, 2014).

As the examples above suggest, this approach defines commons not necessarily (or exclusively) by their common-pool resource characteristics (rivalry in consumption and non-exclusion of users), but rather by the degree of autonomy they provide from capital and State, and the type of social relationships that constitute them. As a consequence, this approach lends itself to a distinction between commons as milieus of non-commodified reproduction not driven by the profit motive of commodity-producing commons—an implicit dimension of both Hardin's and Ostrom's frameworks (Caffentzis, 2010, Federici & Caffentzis, 2014). In contrast to a vision of the commons as a "third sector", between the State and the market, this perspective envisions the commons as empowering and enabling social struggles against the two. This does not deny a potential role for the State in helping carve out support for the struggles to defend, reclaim and construct commons. Examples where this has been important include the sanctioning of the right of the indigenous people to use the natural resources in their territories by the Venezuelan Constitution in 1999, and the recognition of communal property by the Bolivian Constitution in 2009.

Future directions

Commons, despite being generally used interchangeably with common property resources, has always been a substantial topic of interest within ecological economics. While there is neither a unified nor clearly defined approach to the commons shared by the diversity of strands within it, most debates within ecological economics have focused on either refuting Hardin's tragedy framework and/or (somewhat uncritically) celebrating the work of Ostrom and her colleagues. Indeed, the refutation is critical and valuable given that Hardin's work has served to legitimise widespread privatisation and the imposition of a specific, Western, form of property relations on the commons. Consequently, ecological economists working on the commons have predominantly been concerned with (re)emphasising Hardin's mistake when conceptualising the commons as an open-access resource and further documenting cases of successful commons management by self-devised local institutional arrangements.

Such work has demonstrated several important aspects of the policy prescriptions stemming from Hardin's work:

1. privatisation and 'statisation' have resulted in devastating social and ecological outcomes in different settings;
2. institutions, social groups and the non-human environment co-evolve;
3. related to the preceding point, the key to successful management of the commons is to achieve a correct match between institutions and the cultural and the biophysical environments;
4. assumption of *homo economicus* as a behavioural foundation is misconceived.

Ostrom and her colleagues' work struck a chord with ecological economists especially regarding the last point, because of their long tradition of stressing that the motivation and behaviour of human beings are endogenously determined by social structures.

This research, however, suffers from many of the same issues that plague the Ostrom School. Ecological economists have certainly been concerned with the equity implications associated with private or State expropriations of the commons and the unequal appropriations of global commons, as encapsulated in the notion of ecological debt. However, in the absence of a coherent analytical framework on the political economy of the commons, these issues have often been addressed as single-standing instances of misinformed or ill-conceived policy. As such, the more structural conflict between the commons and the political-economic context (i.e. capitalism), within which they are embedded, is rendered invisible in most ecological economics writing on the commons. Thus the dimensions of inequality within the commons and the power dynamics that shape them have gone largely unaddressed, except for the notable work done primarily by feminist ecological economists (e.g. Agarwal, 2001).

More generally, ecological economics would benefit from a broader engagement with the burgeoning commons literature. While there is much to incorporate from analyses of non-traditional commons that fall outside of the ecological economics radar, the most significant contribution of such an engagement would perhaps be in terms of the agenda of social and ecological justice that has always been fundamental to ecological economics. One notable line of correspondence, for instance, is that between the literature on multiple valuation languages (e.g. Martinez-Alier, 2002)—that problematises the imposition of the language of monetary exchange values to the detriment of other value systems within ecological economics—and the understanding of commons as non-commodified sites of social reproduction. Similarly, the existing interaction of the literature on the commons and on degrowth would benefit from the inspiring formulation of commons as spaces of collective and democratic social reproduction. De Angelis and Harvie (2014) make the assertion that today the demands for social and ecological justice and calls for alternative forms of living cannot be meaningfully met without a vision of how to organise the terrain of commons as non-commodified systems of social reproduction.

Concluding remarks

This chapter has laid out different approaches to conceptualising the commons and the connected understandings of the physical and social reality in which they are embedded. Grasping the different frameworks underlying the uses of the notion is important beyond its value as an analytical exercise, because these frameworks are tied to different visions of politics and policies regarding the commons.

The framework mobilised by Autonomist Marxists that rescues the notion of the commons from being frozen as a tragedy or conflicted production unit is noteworthy. By positing commons as a process based and relational concept, this framework envisions commons as constituted in part by social relationships, collective practices, struggles over access and control, and the forms of subjectivity that are (re)configured. It thus opens up space to recognise the diversity of forms that commons and commoning practices can take as well as their dynamism; it helps illuminate the existing and proliferating forms of commons and commoning practices. This reveals the many forms of contemporary social struggles that are continuously constructing and reproducing the commons, and thus sheds light on the potential of political action.

The framework also highlights relationships between the social and the commons that are not resource-centric (e.g. being self-sufficient, autonomous reproduction of life, guaranteeing subsistence rather than profit-generation) and incorporates the bases on which social relationships of commoning arise (e.g. solidarity, collectivity, cooperation, self-governance, egalitarianism, democracy). This invigorates a fundamentally social ecological notion of the commons, rather than an understanding of the commons as purely physical ecological entities. Social ecological economics can thus gain a lot from such an understanding.

Note

1 This refers to a statement by Marx (1967 [1867]: 507-508) that: "The process, therefore, that clears the way for the capitalist system, can be none other than the process which takes away from the labourer the possession of his means of production; a process that transforms, on the one hand, the social means of subsistence and of production into capital, on the other, the immediate producers into wage labourers."

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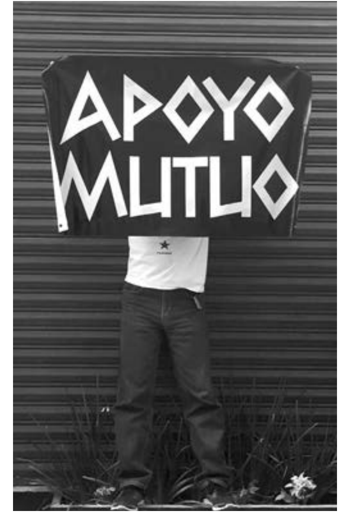
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MUTUAL AID

Our activate a and / or reminder that can act as we did earthquake, self-management outside institutional

On September 19, 2017, a 7.1 Richter scale earthquake struck Mexico City and the states of Morelos, Puebla, Guerrero, Oaxaca and State of Mexico, leaving an estimated 370 dead, 3289 injured, and hundreds of buildings and infrastructure tragically destroyed. On the same date, 32 years earlier, more than 10,000 people had lost their lives in another earthquake in the country's capital. The quake opened deep wounds from the Mexican past.

The general population immediately and energetically turned to the rescue and support for earthquake victims. Images of citizen brigades that operated, even without institutional mediation, were distributed by media from all over the world.

For some weeks there was a kind of collaborative community, a network of affection and direct action. It was evident that Mexicans work with effectiveness and great compassion in tragedies. But afterwards? In our daily life? Unfortunately, this context dissolved quickly, "naturally", returning to the harsh social environment that characterizes us, mainly marked by the gigantic social and economic inequity of our country, and by machismo.

When the earthquake took place, my brother Diego and I were in Berlin about to move for a few days to Athens, a trip that still echoes in our minds for historical, political and social issues. When we returned to Mexico in October, we witnessed how this period of true solidarity was fading away. Therefore, influenced by the activism of the Greek society (hit by the austerity measures and in a kind of generalized boycott to the government), we decided to create a typographic image that could be distributed among friends and any interested person to be printed and displayed in public places, windows or balconies. We started to give printed tarpaulins, an economic support or material used in Mexico especially for proselytizing purposes, real state promotion and at street markets, trying to give them a different use.

MUTUAL AID (APOYO MUTUO) is inspired by the theory put forth by the Russian writer Piotr Kropotkin, proposing cooperation, teamwork and reciprocity to provide a common benefit to individuals, that is: An individual benefit from collective action, as shown in hundreds of examples in his book, both in animal and human species. Our idea was to activate a simple and / or symbolic reminder that we can act together, as we did after the earthquake, with self-management and outside any institutional framework.

Through my social media and word of mouth, this call for printed tarpaulins was announced at the end of 2017. Today, approximately one hundred facades in the capital of the country, Guadalajara, Monterrey, Zacatecas, Papantla, San Miguel de Allende and Cuernavaca, wear tarpaulins of MUTUAL AID, generating curiosity among passers-by, curiosity that I want to think can refer them to positive ideas or actions.

In February 2018, Arredondo \ Arozarena, the gallery that represents my work and that has kindly supported this project as a venue to deliver tarpaulins, invited me to participate with a performance at the ACME Art Salon in Mexico City. Mónica Sorroza, a collaborator in several of my projects, selected and recorded with her voice several fragments of Kropotkin's book, inserting this recording in a portable speaker. For four days, Mónica positioned herself in a room at different times, reproducing these audios with her recorded voice, like an "aural background",

idea was to simple symbolic we together, after the with and any framework.

while she silently read the book; when a person approached, she took a print of the typographic image (letter size on bond paper) and on the back she wrote the fragment that was reading at the moment, to later give it to them. A simple but friendly gesture. The reaction of the audience was emotional.

A month later, my solo exhibition *COMUNES* was opened at Casa del Lago UNAM in Mexico City. Víctor Palacios, its curator, also invited me to participate in the wonderful project *Batiente*, creating a flag for the historic building of this emblematic cultural site of the Bosque de Chapultepec, normally attended by thousands of people each week. The flag that Diego and I designed had a slight variation to the "anarchist black" of our tarpaulins and prints: We chose the colors of the Olympic flag as a remembrance of the Mexican student movement shot down in October 1968, for, according to the government of President Gustavo Díaz Ordaz, being a threat to the Olympic Games and for "spreading communist ideas". For the lifting ceremony we read fragments of Kropotkin's book in four voices: Mónica Sorroza, Mirna Castro, Julio Cárdenas and myself; As well as a brief introduction by Víctor about the ideas of Kropotkin. Subsequently, identical prints as those from the ACME Art Salon were given to hundreds of attendees that afternoon. The flag hoisted on the shaft of Casa del Lago UNAM for one year. A studio recording of this reading, with the assistance of Leonardo Santiago and my brother's mix, can be heard here: https://soundcloud.com/suplexestudio/apoyomutuo.

During the summer of 2018 I taught the workshop *Aguzar el oído* in the city of Zacatecas, within the framework of the FEMSA Biennial. For a week we met to hear and discuss countless sound sources, as well as walking through its colonial center and the imposing Cerro de la Bufa with ears wide open, in absolute camaraderie. The theme of MUTUAL AID began spreading in several activities from the didactic program. By the ending of the biennial, Willy Kautz, its curator, was walking through several points of Zacatecas with a tarpaulin and he also surprisingly showed it at the end of his participation through the last forum, a very emotional action too. At the end of the biennial, some tarpaulins were hung and even today they accompany activities such as collective weave sessions or assemblies about feminism.

By the end of that same year, the collective and venue *Lugar Común*, at Monterrey, decided to temporarily put their activities on hold with an action that would invite to the recognition of the work from "the others" as a principle of empathy and love (so necessary in our country).

With the formidable work of Pedro Magaña, Tahanny Lee Betancourt and Marco Treviño, we painted the facade of *Lugar Común* and, afterwards, a meeting was held with the enthusiastic participation of a large part of the contemporary art community from the city. I gave out stickers and some T-shirts, since our media has extended to these common tools of popular culture; I have proposed that this project will be fully paid by myself, only eventually with a voluntary cooperation from those who ask specifically for a T-shirt, so it had limited editions. It is not because of an ethical or moral question, it is simply to replicate the autonomous, self-managing exercise that was experienced momentarily during the aftermath of the earthquake.

In March and April 2019 we also gave away printed stuff at my solo exhibition, *Movimiento y colapso*, in the gallery *El Otro Mono* in the city of Cuernavaca. MUTUAL AID will continue in the formats, supports or routes that are viable, as is this publication now. The objective remains simple, and I apologize for being repetitive: To be aware that every action we carry out has a greater impact than ourselves. If we have this in mind, we can build better bridges of communication with "the others", and gain an individual benefit from acting collectively.

Emicel Mata, who has made this editorial layout in *Free Berlin*, experienced the earthquake at the office where she worked then, and could leave the building without major problems. Hours later she was supporting in various tasks in a building that collapsed two streets away from our apartment. For many months our love blossomed in a trail of dust and death. We have come forward thanks to MUTUAL AID.

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Towards Collective Thriving: Mutual Aid, Responsibility & Trust

A conversation between carla bergman, Berit Fischer & Nick Montgomery / 4 April 2019, Bergen, Norway

C: I think it would be good to start with some words from the Russian naturalist and anarchist philosopher Peter Kropotkin, who wrote *Mutual Aid* in 1902: "Don't compete. Competition is always dangerous. We don't need to compete because there are enough resources to go around." I think this is a good one because it brings in the question of capitalism (i.e. access to resources can be difficult), so perhaps we can talk about how to survive under capitalism, as artists, as organizers, with mutual aid as part of our work (while also working to end capitalism).

B: I agree, it's a good quote, as it brings in the question of alternative ways of resistance to competition. The notion of togetherness, resistant togetherness, could be one of them, along with the notion of joyfulness, co- and re-learning and response-ability which can be powerful tools against competition and which seem fundamental to the notion of mutual aid. These are concepts that you elaborate in your co-written book *Joyful Militancy: Building Thriving Resistance in Toxic Times*. We've just experienced two days of experimenting together to put these concepts into action and to embody them at the Faculty of Fine Art, Music and Design at the University of Bergen in the 2-day experiment that I curated, called *The Articulating Body – Experiments on De-configuring Reactionary Anaesthesia.*

N: The way that we talk about response-ability is an increase in our capacity to be responsive to situations, and to feel out what they mean to us. It's not responsibility as a moral duty, but as the ability to respond. To become more responsive is to be able to perceive more and sense more, and embody and contribute more to the situation, and I think carla's really good at making that much more practical.

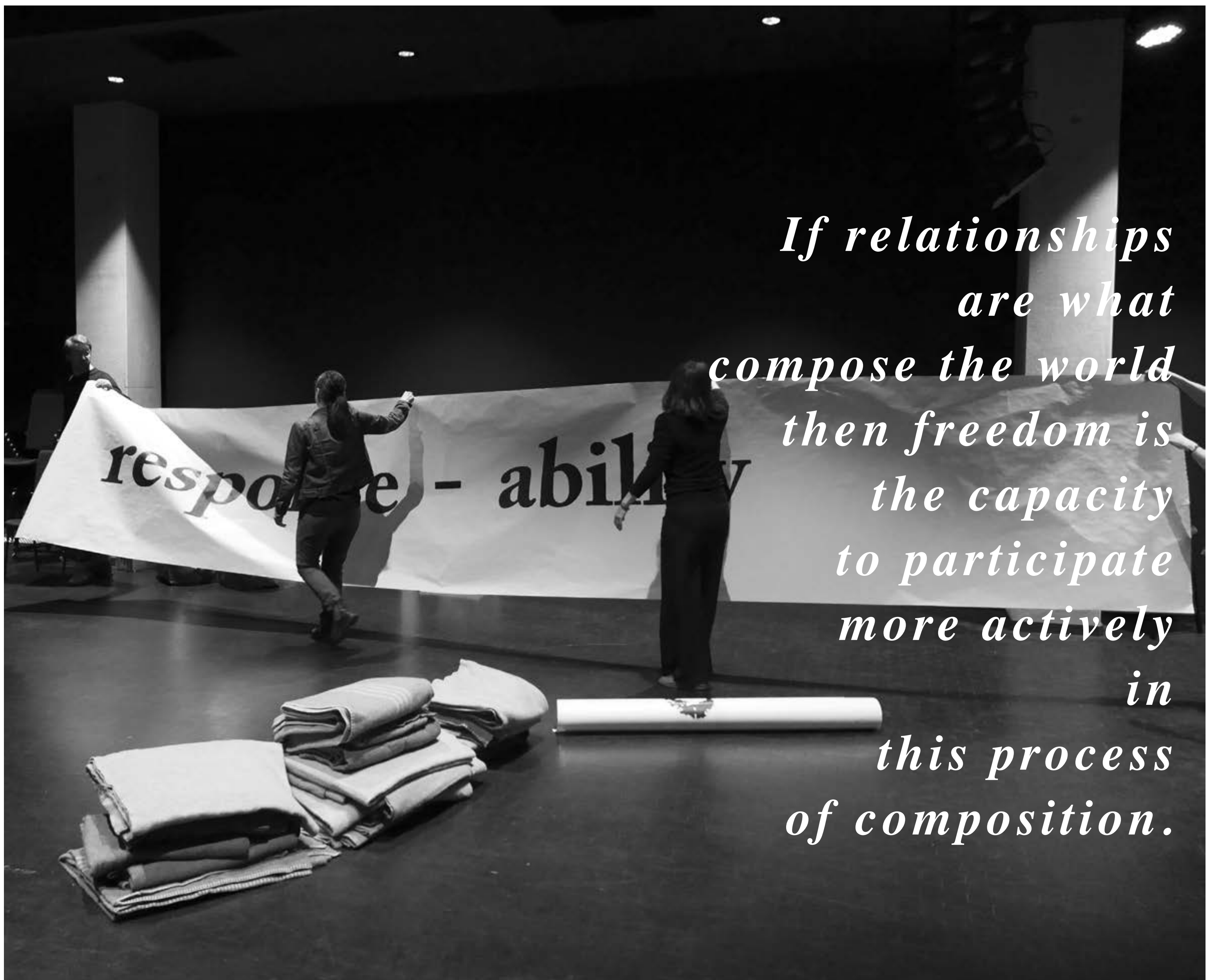
C: There are two threads here. One is the ability to respond, so not imposing a structure or rule book onto everyone; instead, begin with considering people's different abilities and resources, and their personal access to doing things. This has to be an ongoing conversation, and one that is often rooted in notions of trust; because trusting each other, and supporting each other, and meeting each other where each of us are at, are good places to start…

Secondly, it goes back to my own work with younger children in deschooling or free schooling settings (Purple Thistle Centre and Windsor House Democratic school in Vancouver, BC), where kids are in a self-directed learning environment, that is also about a lot of autonomy, and what the kids notice right away is, that they have to be more responsible. So, with freedom comes responsibility. This means that there is a tremendous amount of trust at play here. And, points to why most institutions don't have these basic values (of mutual aid, trust, responsibility, etc.) as part of their mechanisms. Most institutions will tell you where to be, often how to be, and when to be there – so you don't have to be that responsible, especially for others. Whereas, when you have to figure these questions out on your own (or as a group), you have to constantly think about what you're doing and how that's affecting others. It's an ethical move. That's how I like to think about response-ability in action, something that is constantly discussed and reworked, and that it happens with people across difference, including age.

N: Just to add to that, this is connected to the way industrial institutions and infrastructures remove response-ability. I think there's a lot at stake in this. So much of our built environment is designed to remove our response-ability. For instance, where does our water come from, where does our shit go, where does our food come from, who takes care of us when we get older? The dominant ideal – including in Leftist or progressive circles – is that the State or capitalism will do these things for us. But some fully automated society isn't an utopia; it's a grim dystopia, because we're removed from being able to figure out together how things are made, and how we're going to organize our lives, build our dwellings, and so on; the whole question of life and how we relate to each other and to resources – we're prevented from even asking those questions in the industrial world.

B: Reflecting about response-ability as the capacity of being aware and being affected, I think that the notion of empathy is very fundamental. In my own work I've come to understand empathy – in the rationale of scholar Carolyn Pedwell – as "affective translation", in that you are not adapting to the other person's existence, nor do you become the other, but that it's rather a co-existence and recognition of difference of the other.

carla you also mentioned the notion of trust which equally seems to be central to the notion of mutual aid. I feel that trust in oneself is one of the very first steps, through clarity and awareness the ability to be affected are vital to having trust in oneself; through that one can gain courage and self-empowerment (the revolution



carla bergman is an independent scholar, filmmaker, and producer. She is the co-director of EMMA Talks, a mini-art-festival and speaker's series by women, and co-author of *Joyful Militancy: Building Thriving Resistance in Toxic Times* (AK Press, 2017). / Berit Fischer is a freelance curator and writer. She currently is a PhD researcher at the Winchester School of Art/Southampton University, UK in which she searches for new and post-representational ways of curation that activate a micropolitical and holistic making of social empathy. / Nick Montgomery is a theory nerd, precarious sessional instructor, and permaculturalist living on Lekwungen territories in the Pacific Northwest of territories claimed by Canada. He holds a PhD in Cultural Studies, and his doctoral project focused on intersections of anarchism and permaculture. He is the co-author, with carla bergman, of *Joyful Militancy*.

starts with yourself) and to develop trust in the other. This appears as a fertile ground for developing and celebrating mutual aid.

N: Where do you start with trust is like a chicken and egg question. We need to trust ourselves, we need to be able to trust others, and we need situations that create the conditions for that trust. It's hard to say which comes first, whether trusting ourselves or trusting others, or creating situations where trust is in the air.

C: I think we are probably born to trust, we trust our parents/caregivers, it's how we survive! But, it doesn't take long for that trust to get destroyed, even if the parents are fabulous. Why? Because children are seen as untrusted. So trust gets constantly destroyed. How I tie this to mutual aid is, while I try and ward off 'isms' from my life (of course, it's hard), I would say I'm a "mutual aidist", which was influenced by reading Kropotkin 25 years ago. Kropotkin says that we are born to trust and to be in solidarity with each other. It behooves us to be in solidarity, for our survival. But, it also gets crushed (solidarity/mutual aid) because all the destructive and controlling systems under Empire, whether it's the state or capitalism, or other power structures, the ruling class actively shuts down mutual aid relationships between us, so that control and profit can happen.

B: Peter Kropotkin also says, high self-awareness and confidence in oneself and others are seminal against the idea of autonomous, detached individualism, of separatism. One of today's strongest strategies that neoliberal capitalism and dominant structures impose on us is this separatism, isolated individualism; it is a fertile ground for manipulation. If we train and stay conscious about these "innate" capacities such as trust, but also about caring and sharing (which also happen in nature), we not only can build mutual aid, but also powerful forms of resistance against the dominant powers.

N: Going back to trust, I'm thinking about one of the things for me that has been influential, is the work of the feminist Italian-American scholar, Silvia Federici, whose history of the witch trials showed how capitalism developed a whole set of oppressive divisions as a conscious strategy to sow distrust among communities. That was really important to enable the emergence of capitalism. For instance, in Medieval Europe there were really close social ties between people, and according to Federici, Medieval Europe was teetering on the brink of revolution; and the witch trials and their divisions were a solution to prevent that revolt from happening, to make communities distrust each other and destroy the social bonds that existed.

B: Yes, and also the destruction of subaltern (e.g. pagan holistic) knowledges.

C: Connected to this was the rise of charities, which undermines mutual aid. This was on purpose and designed to weaken the social bonds by providing services to take care of those needing help. From soup kitchens to more hierarchical models of care, which of course thwarted and often destroyed mutual aid and solidarity within communities. These state interventions were actively designed to stop revolt and uprisings in all kinds of subtle and intense ways.

B: The notion of nationalism, or identity, goes along exactly with that, a manmade systemic hierarchical undertaking.

N: This reminds me how Federici looked for communities that resisted the trials, and was trying to find examples, of community wide resistance; and according to her this was quite rare. Some families were trying to get family members who had been accused, and smuggled them away, but there were few examples of community-wide resistance. But one she did find was a Basque fishing village, and the reason behind it, she says, was that they had a really strong social fabric where people were deeply entangled, because life was seasonal and communal. When the men would fish, that left the women in charge of daily life in the village, and work hadn't been reorganized according to the wage. So when the priests came and tried to create these divisions it was really clear to the people that the trials were a danger to their community because women held deep responsibilities, and their work and knowledge was vital; so people resisted on a broad scale, and they refused the trials.

B: I wanted to come back to the question of charity, and equally so insurance, that utilizes trust for capital abundance.

C: There's so many examples of this kind of purposefully undoing social cooperation, mutual aid, and it is ongoing. It seeps into our radical communities, organizing circles, and artistic worlds, where we replicate this idea of creating something for consumption rather than for connection or cooperation. And, when thinking about being an artist and how we can work to think about nurturing relationships and social bonds across difference, while also surviving under capitalism, I think that's a big issue and ongoing struggle for any of us wanting to live in a different world(s).

B: Yes, the idea of creating something for consumption and not for interrelatedness or cooperation also brings to mind this whole notion of self-representation in today's existence in hyper-digitalism. We're constantly lured into existing within mediated conceptions of reality and into the question of how I can present something or myself, for instance on instagram, facebook or other social media. In particular younger generations, the so called "digital natives", who have not experienced a pre-digital existence. In the long run

I wonder what an influence living in a mediated existence will have on us; further forms of detachment of the self? Preparing your food and making it look nice just so that you can post it on instagram is something very different from preparing food with care and attention with the intention of “feeding” and “nurturing” yourself (thought in literal and metaphorical ways). What effects will this constant mediated self-representation have on mutual aid and the future?

C: I’ve been around a lot of young people and I see them actively trying to connect, and looking for relationships and bonds. I think about being a teenager in the early 80s – that’s the start of the isolation with all the technology – and I was often home alone watching eight hours of TV a day, because I skipped out of school. I might have been better off if I had instagram to talk to my friends around the world, to find some connection. I’m not sure if it’s a straightforward answer; I don’t like a lot of the social media, and the behaviors that come out of it, but I think we put too much emphasis on technology as being a distraction. I mean, when you try and talk to someone when they’re reading a book, it’s impossible. I think with computers you can multi-task in ways that you couldn‘t when doing other modes of distraction or work. I would just hesitate to be down on technology in a general way, it’s important to think about ways it can help, too.

B: I was thinking more in regards to the detachment from the self. But I agree. It’s also a very powerful tool to connect, activate and empower, also on the socio-political realm, e.g. thinking about the Arab Spring or the current Yellow Vest movement against president Macron’s politics in France; a complete heterogeneous, self-organized movement that certainly is aided through social media.

N: Maybe it’s a question of how those tools are used. I think the Arab Spring, and the Yellow Vests in France, are examples of people using social media to activate something, and ultimately people are actually coming together in physical spaces; that’s important to recognize. Social media is designed to individualize us and to engineer a certain kind of affective control, but it’s also being subverted by people. I am also freaked out by social media, but I can also see the potential of mutual aid happening there.

C: Mutual aid is about sharing resources, and solidarity around resources, and I think we see that a lot in our online relationships. Is it passive or active? I would argue it‘s more passive, in terms of how it makes us feel ultimately, but it is still doing something.

B: You talk in your book about what you call “common notions”. Can you elaborate on that?

C: It’s basically the values that collectively emerge within a group. It’s not the same as principles, because these values move and change based on the needs and desires of the group; you can’t make a rule out of it. One thing from all the interviews we did for the book and from personal experience, is that trust and responsibility are two common notions that seem to be at play across the board. That’s why we focused on those two.

N: I think the paradox is that as soon as common notions become imperatives or expectations, that’s when they fail, because then they’re not something that’s emerging from people’s relationships and situations. How do we hold these common notions lightly enough so they can circulate and grow and deepen instead of holding them as an expectation, and that’s really hard. We wanted to make it really clear that this is a permanent question we want to be asking.

C: We also talk about attunement in the book, and really this is about being as present as you can be within these relationships, a commitment to tuning into each other. Staying with the trouble, together, and with the relationship. If trust gets rigid, then you need to look at it.

B: I’d like to add the notion of presence to this conversation, as it is important to me in my work and in thinking about mutual aid. Presence, in the sense of being aware and critically conscious, actually can be quite a profound tool for self-empowerment and resistance, if we really were to practice it. Is mutual aid something we need to practice?

C: Yes. I know at times it seems like an abstract idea, but really it’s just about being generous. It can be so subtle and everyday, such as making food for each other, or thinking about different ways to work together. We all need to make a living, but it’s really nice if you come at it through mutual aid, a concrete generosity, because it’s amazing what you can do together. So, for instance instead of calling the cops, you call upon your community, or you share picking up kids from school. If you share resources as part of your core way of being together, I think mutual aid can really be part of your life.

B: Maybe we can talk about joyfulness, which is so crucial to your book.

N: The concept of joy we’re using comes out of affect theory. When I think about affect, I think about a quote from Octavio Butler’s *Parable of the Sower*, and it’s quite simple, but it gets at the heart of the question of joy: “All that you touch you change. All that you change changes you, and the only lasting truth is change.” That resonates really closely with Spinoza’s conception of affect that we wrote about, because what we were trying to get at is, that we’re all embedded in this complex ecology and joy isn’t the name for a stable state, or a recognizable feeling, but a transition where we are becoming more capable, becoming able to feel and think and do

more, and that's going to look totally different for different people. I think one of the things that makes it really compelling, for me, is that it's super abstract; it's everywhere but it is also very concrete, connected to thinking and feeling and doing.

C: We are making a distinction that it's not happiness. Author and feminist, Rebecca Solnit once said (and I am paraphrasing here) that happiness is the wall to wall carpet of feelings; it's passive, whereas joy is this thing that happens in flashes, it's never forever, it moves and changes. In her book *The Dispossessed*, Ursula Le Guin talks about joy throughout, and defines it very much how we define it. These words by her were always inspiring to me: "I certainly wasn't happy. Happiness has to do with reason, and only reason earns it. What I was given was the thing you can't earn, and can't keep, and often don't even recognize at the time; I mean joy."

B: It's nice that you also mention Spinoza in thinking about joy and relational aesthetics, sensibility, or sensing. I wanted to refer to Spinoza's idea of relational freedom, and I really love this quote from your book: "Being free and having ties was one and the same thing. I'm free because I have ties. Because I'm linked to a reality greater than me, and so all things are an active and dynamic process." This is a very holistic image, and I very much appreciate this idea of relational freedom, which again, might be the basis for mutual aid.

N: That might be a quote of us drawing on The Invisible Committee, an anonymous collective author based in France, who are also deeply influenced by Spinoza. The notion of relational freedom was really important for us in our book, and we juxtaposed it with the more mainstream notion of freedom associated with the individual and choice, and this idea that freedom is the capacity to choose or be unhindered or unaffected. This connects to where we started and the way our world is really designed to bring that kind of individual into being, over and over. The airport or the mall is the perfect setup to create that individual, because in the airport I have no ties and no responsibilities. What I'm missing in those spaces and what those spaces are designed to prevent, is the emergence of a relational freedom where there's intimacy, care, deep relationships, and also the potential for antagonism or conflict. This is rendered impossible in so many other spaces in our lives as well, and this is what we need to get back.

B: "Non-places", that offer agony instead, exactly because of their successful design of disconnectedness…

C: To me curiosity and care are connected, even when we are faced with interpersonal conflict.

B: They might be the "driving force", to use some of your wording.

C: I was thinking about the name of your workshop, The Articulating Body, and was wondering if you can connect that to this idea of mutual aid. Do you see a connection?

B: Yes, thank you. I'd like to call it "an experiential encounter" that I was striving for. And I would not necessarily solely connect it to this particular curated encounter, which is one iteration of a larger project that I call Radical Empathy Lab. I created this structure of a laboratory for experimenting and testing out to create experiences, spaces and spheres of trust, of caring and sharing, in particular, to train and exercise relational sensibilities. This is all part of an overall question that I have been researching and working on the last couple of years, of how we can activate a holistic making of social empathy. (It is the core of my practice based PhD, in which I in particular experiment with how this question can be implemented in the curatorial field, as an approach to post-representational curating; looking for curatorial agency that does not only display or present ideas, but that rather aims to experiment with how we can embody, live and experience these ideas).

Thinking about mutual aid, one of the starting points is empathy, for oneself and the other. How can we holistically activate empathy, as "affective translation", creating space or situations in which difference and heterogeneity is supported, interconnectedness and relational freedom are created. This seems to be at the basis for mutual aid. For me, one of the big questions remains: sustainability, how can we transport the temporary moments of such co-learning further, to have more spaces or infrastructure where we could practice these forms of encounter, to practice this relational freedom, and aiding mutuality.

C: When I think about sustainability, it doesn't have to be so big, to me, small scale is key. When we work small, we can change today, especially our most intimate relationships. Activists talk about mutual aid relationship as a given, but often they are still very hierarchical. So if we're going to aid mutuality across age, difference, and abilities, we have to really be open to accepting and receiving the aid in our relationships, which are often nuanced and not straightforward. For instance, if we have a certain power or privilege, we're not always comfortable with receiving it, because we have to be vulnerable. Attempting to make those small changes in the everyday can have a massive and radical outgrowth.

N: This makes me think of this question I tried to ask about curation the other day; you are both obviously really good at this, curating spaces. It's not conventional curation; you are actually curating experiences and supporting people in feeling more connected with each other. This is a really beautiful process and this immediately raises the question how can we do this all the time, to

incorporate this into our everyday lives, and how do we do that – it's easy to say, we're always curating, but I want to make that question a little harder, to recognize we also have jobs, that there are forces constantly trying to individualize us. Intergenerational relationships are hard because kids are segregated and sent off to school, and I didn't have kids in my life until I started to live with a family, and so it's really difficult, and I guess I wonder how do we actively work against these forces. If it's about bringing that sense of curating, or creating those conditions in our everyday lives, what does that look like, to push back those tendencies of individualization?

C: We can't enforce this on anyone, there can't be a rule book for social relationships, it has to be emergent, it has to be about and come from the people in the room. There can also be some scaffolding in place, guides, some language or pathways that we can be inspired from, so it's not a free for all, but it's not rule bound either. The research I've done has pointed to some clear threads that run through successful relationships, and spaces that live beyond the curated space, but you've got to be OK with failure, because it's going to happen, a lot – because most of us are so stressed under the forces of Empire. There are moments when you need to tune out, have a break. I live with three people with the ages range being from 15 to 58, and we commit to this notion of a relationship centered home, so not a child centered home. And this is a lot of work, it's a lot of work to show up for three other humans, to be there for intimacy, and we do a really good job most of the time, and we've all seen how it's gotten better through practice. But with this focus on these day-to-day relationships, I notice that my capacity to do a lot beyond is lessening. Being in community for so long, I noticed that intimacy can be lacking – it's hard to have this level of presence for 20-50 people! While many of us showed up with lots of solidarity, mutual aid and some of us mentorship, I know for me, that I couldn't be intimate, I couldn't do what I think we are really trying to get at it here, which is to have a real thriving life of feeling your best self, having empathy flowing, we need to feel deeply connected. I think mutual aid, a real system of generosity flowing that is rooted in response-ability can help with this dynamic. Because if we shared more of the workload, there'd be more time for depth to emerge.

B: Not only the workload, but also our sensitivities, needs and feelings.

N: One thing that I have learned a lot from you, carla, is that boundaries are really important. I see a lot of my mentors having a greater sense of what they're capable of, what kind of relationships you can support and reciprocate, because if you're extending intense intimacy to everyone, you're going to get used up, and people are going to feel misled or wronged, and I think it's a complicated thing, but a really important thing. We can't just love each other infinitely.

B: I agree and I'm still learning this. If we start to practice a presence and an awareness and sensitivity for our own capacities and boundaries on a regular basis, we take on response-ability; not only for oneself, but also for others and as part of the social body. I think this is a powerful move; the personal is political as we learnt from feminist thinking. It's down to us to make the choices – be it on a professional level or within or personal and daily lives – I think it's very important not to give up, and keep practicing and trying within our own capacity.

C: This reminds me of how activists can easily collapse into self-sacrifice. As activists, we tend to overdo it, we can do too much, or believe that what we do is never enough (because the world is burning!). And then we often burn out, and at worst, resentments build and relationships suffer. And to me, this idea of self-sacrifice is the opposite of self-care, even though they often get conflated. Thinking about how mutual aid between each other is connected to our own individual capacities and boundaries, makes me realize how crucial it is to have these conversations about care and support all the time. When you're at the beginning, even just thinking about working together, about organizing together, these conversations have to be explicit and begin with questions to one another like: who has the capacity to do a, b and c, etc.? These are vital conversations, the nuts and bolts in terms of how we're going to do mutual aid, how we're going to take care of each other... I think the more explicit we are with it, the less likely we're going to have this imbalance, resentment and this self-sacrificing happen. One of the ways I was able to have more intimate relationships, or find a way to feel less frustrated, was by having conversations that are more direct: talking more openly about my capacity, getting feedback, setting boundaries that are clear, asking for help, and listening to what others are really needing and asking for… Solidarity (mutual aid) happens when you can ask for help, as well as give it.

Naomi Hennig

From Art Strike to Human Strike: Subjects are Leaving the Factory

You've got a very soft vision of art
You've got a deficit disorder of heart
These are the wings of an endangered drum pattern
This is the flight of the hapless, you've got it all backwards
– DJ Krush

Naomi Hennig lives in Berlin, where she works as researcher, artist, curator and project coordinator. She has been involved in artist-run initiatives and institutions, including nGbK and District, Berlin. Her current research is focussing on the geopolitics of neoliberalism and their spacial/ecological implications.

*Originally written in 2012 for Die Schöne Stadt, Halle.

To consider the abysmal nature of the profession of the artist is a complicated process that cannot be dealt with in a couple of sentences. Therefore we will only discuss in which way individual actors conceive and implement their departure, how "break-aways" from the existing art systems are argued and formalized and wherein the potential of such a gesture may lie. The word "strike" is not to be understood as a means of creating pressure in the context of a (de facto non-existent) labor conflict, but rather as a pattern of political action that some of the artists named below relate in their performative works.

Motives for the departure from art are conceptual as well as material in nature, and in many cases a combination of both. In order to formulate a somewhat distanced critique of the art system as such, it might be more convenient to focus on the critical artistic statement only, leaving the personal situation of the artist, the struggle for making a living or social recognition and reward, aside. There have been singular cases where quite materially successful artists took the consequence of leaving the art scene because of their critical understanding of the institution of art. But with the emergence of a somewhat inflationary trend towards "critical art practice" on the other side, a whole new range of opportunities opened up for those positions that before would have subsisted at the very margins of the art scene.

However, a pure ideological or institutional critique, that which ignores social and economical conditions, and the subjective "suffering" of the silenced majority, would miss the core of the matter. It is at the same time a concern to abstract also from the specific interests of the actors within the art industry, in order to highlight tendencies that reflect the wider structural transformations of contemporary society.

The problem of the participation is many-sided and departures from the scene can only be individually argued. Nevertheless, it is clear to all that the unhappiness in this career has a direct connection to economical insecurity. And yet it appears the image of the organized collective labor struggle is un-connectable with the features of the field of labor and the self-conceptions of the protagonists. From now on it is certain, that within the cognitive factory of the culture-worker other forms of protest will have to be invented, and for now the idea of the strike will be only a slogan, a placeholder for the new collective ritual of placing themselves in the right.

The outlook appears rather bleak, the "Complaining on a Higher Level" makes up the majority of the conversations between colleagues: the genius is starved, the atelier is reduced to the size of a monitor, the work-day parceled into distinct work fields and is therefore endless, and the market of attention asks for online-portfolios of our tastes, within which our perversions as well as political inclinations, social contacts or consumer preferences are cultivated and curated. The material subsistence happens between unskilled labor in the low-income-sector and the exploitation of soft-skills – learned in the training camps of the cultural network-job, only to finally be sold out on the desktops of the creative economy.

Depression and clinical symptoms are increasing as a result of changing job markets, for which the culture-sector, with its precarious agreements, progresses.[1] Before our eyes the pyramid-structure of the field is erected, where the majority of participants find no living: stiff competition and secret selection-mechanisms generate the success of circa 2% of all art college graduates who "make it" (what exactly?). There is no shortage of reasons for a mass walk-out from the culture-sector. The negligence of art happens in multiple and contrary ways, in many recognized and exalted exit-scenarios of some established artists – and far more often simply by gradually letting go, in not so clearly observable, addressable moments of countless biographies. It shows in the statistics – in case any official organization would even undertake the effort to collect the data. In these moments when you are not really able to answer when being asked about your profession. In the burnt-out space between the last project and the next funding application, or in the mill between meaningless hourly-work and the unused atelier, and so on.

While lamenting this progressing artistic dying-off we primarily seek to recapitulate some of the exit-performances that are motivated by general ideological doubts concerning the social bubble that goes under the name "art system".

The more famous examples of terminated artist careers are often marked by some form of proclamation or performative verbal act. While they are in the act of professional suicide the actors paradoxically seem to sneak back into the realms of representation. Instead of simply exiting, a substitute (a text, manifesto, proclamation, some sort of message) is created and distributed in order to communicate and mark the NO MORE. Instead of the NOTHING, once more, SOMETHING is created. The exit of Lee Lozano (1969) is not simply a drop out, but a Drop Out Piece: the last and maybe most famous aesthetic invention that overshadows all previous work and is situated at the end of Lozano's artistic development that starts with painting and proceeds to a series of conceptual manipulations of her own social life (see below). Her exit, like all previous performances, is marked by a handwritten program (Lozano's artistic signature, literally). These documents are preserved and form the foundation for a museolization of manifestations that emerged in the borderland between Lozano's private life and her performances.

Forms of collective exits may be traced back to the historical avant-garde and secessionist movements of the early twentieth century. Facing the complete reintegration of radical aims of difference, for example the Futurists, Surrealists or Situationists into the canon of art history, a question arises: is the artistic exit or the secession from the cultural mainstream ever anything else but "friendly fire"?

What exactly happens, exit from the art world or radical take-over and re-evaluation of the art-term, seems strangely interchangeable. It is possible to think that it is not so much the intention of the individual actor or his/her ability of articulation that decides if through the artists own act of speech (manifesto, program or other presentation of rejection) the exit is even happening, if a border is crossed or maybe altered. It is the historical reception that owns the capacity to either ignore the avant-gardist break of border or to evacuate it retrospectively from its own opposition in order to posthumously reintegrate the material, that its contemporaries then rejected as an improper and unacceptable assault, back into art history. This curve of the artistic flight attempt is a remarkable characteristic, which seems to play mostly beyond the individuals control and which has its origin in the paradoxical heteronomy of the art profession. Simplified, the matter could be summarized as a forced re-integration of oppositional positions into the bourgeois-liberal canon of the culturally accepted. Assimilation of differences – core-business of post-ideological / neo-liberal societies – thereby constitutes the gravitational field that predetermines the failure of the majority of all attempted artistic escape projects. Failure, however, does not imply that the withdrawal was not completed as planned, or that the suspension was not successful from the subjective point of view. Lee Lozano actually managed to never again set foot in the art-world, and also others, like the painter Eugen Schönebeck, have on political grounds and with full consequence stopped producing or publishing works. Yet the reception machinery doesn't stop for individual decisions: the more radical the drop-out, the more the case of Lozano's or Schönebeck's moves to the center of attention. Where even a shred of paper testifies to the exit, it is exhibited with a vengeance. When no such document exists, the exit remains the salt in the soup of every retrospective show. Thus the nihilistic act is ultimately never fully realized. The prominent exits cannot remove their authorship. Inevitably the individual exit, the original subjective act is added to the cultural capital. The drop-out remains a cultural product, its documentation becomes a material work of art, exhibitable or even sellable. Even the physical disappearance of Bas Jan Ader remains under suspicion of an artistic farce and may be the motivation for a posthumous(?) reception. And oh, irony of destiny, Lee Lozano's legacy is represented today by the major international gallery Hauser & Wirth.

Besides individual exits, a series of temporary strikes were proclaimed, one might almost speak of an aesthetic tradition. Here again, Lee Lozano's *General Strike Piece*[2] must be mentioned, a programmatic text, part of her body of work titled *Total Personal & Public Revolution*, publicly read in 1969 in an open meeting of the New York Art Workers Coalition. Over a period of approximately half a year, Lozano boycotted participation in any functions or events of the "Uptown" art world – with one crucial exception: exhibitions and events during which she presented her so-called Pieces (the above-mentioned series of boycotts) were excluded from the strike.

Especially during the late 1960s and early 70s, a number of exits, strikes or similar activities were proclaimed. This temporary accumulation may relate to the disappointment in the political stance conceptual art had advanced with the dematerialization of the art object – which had already been added to the best commercialized commodities in the art market. On the other side there was the pull of the anti-Vietnam protests and emancipatory movements that did not leave the artists unaffected, and so were boycotts and strikes like the Art Workers Coalition motivated by the unwillingness to provide works to exhibit in public art institutions, the identified representatives of the criminally violent state.

Gustav Metzger called in 1974 for an art strike, the *Years Without Art 1977-1980*, which set itself the lofty goal of toppling the art system:

The refusal to labour is the chief weapon of workers fighting the system; artists can use the same weapon. To bring down the art system it is necessary to call for years without art, a period of three years – 1977 to 1980 – when artists will not produce work, sell work, permit work to go on an exhibition, and refuse collaboration with any part of the publicity machinery of the art-world. This total withdrawal of labour is the most extreme collective challenge that artists can make to the state.[3]

The goal of the action was a thinning of the "purely capitalistic-organized art system and its actors" and the "creation of alternative exhibition opportunities". In a fictitious scenario provoked at the end of the text, Metzger called for the formation of artist paramilitary groups to assassinate the gallerists. The result was the exclusion of Metzger from the art world for the following two decades.[4]

The Art Strike 1990-1993 (copied, in best plagiarism-manner, from Metzger's *Years Without Art 1977-1980*) goes back to British artist Stuart Home. It continues in neoist tradition the strategy of fake affirmation of cultural criticism as activism. The international ART STRIKE ACTION COMMITTEES (ASACs) operated the so-called YAWN communiqués edited and distributed by several groups, especially in Great Britain and the United States from about 1987, spreading the campaign for the *Art Strike 1990-1993*. These strike calls, that are always flirting with their own futility, were not motivated by current political events such as the AWC protests of the late 60s. But the aim of the argument is in a similar direction, albeit presented in the form of a distanced provocation. Art is sentenced in ironic-polemic treatises as a fuel for the capitalist, violence-producing society.[5]

What emerges is an indication of a genuine, in retrospect, however, seemingly-naïve social commitment of the 60s, to a disillusioned, cynical, militant rhetoric of the 80s.

The Art Strike on the steps of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, May 22, 1970.
Robert Morris and Poppy Johnson, strike co-chairs, at right, debate museum vice-director Joseph Noble, at left beside striking artist Art Coppedge (photo by Jan van Raay, used with permission).

A new edition of the Art Strike proclamations took place in recent years at the Alytus Biennial, a network meeting of collectives and individuals in the Estonian town of Alytus, protesting against Biennalization and misguided cultural policy using anti-art / neoist strategies.

The manifesto of the LABOUR UNION OF DATA MINERS AND PSYCHIC WORKERS calls in this context for a general strike in 2012 and introduces in its sprawling manifesto the following catalog of imaginable and unimaginable forms of strike.

Our aim is a General Strike:
Our aim is an economical strike
Our aim is a social strike,
Our aim is a cultural strike,
Our aim is a sexual strike,
Our aim is a psychic strike.[6]

Here, the Idea of the strike entirely escapes its conventional framework of institutionalized negotiation rituals in the social democratic tradition and encircles, similarly radically as Lee Lozano's *General Strike Piece*, all areas of life that usually do not belong to the category of work. The text is turning with brutal irony towards what can be observed as an infiltration of work paradigms into all possible kinds of personal, intimate, psychological aspects of life. With this subsumption of all facets of the subject under the imperative of exploitation, the increasing inability to dis-relate oneself from the self-conceptions of the so-called performance society, the possibility of a denial seems imaginable merely in the form of a total boycott of individual and social satisfaction. As exaggerated as such intellectual edifice might seem, it hits into the midst of the still insufficiently explored problem area. We have to not (only) demand more pay, but also change ourselves. Where work starts to breed, under the skin, in the lowlands of the unconscious or libidinal arena, it must be countered with tricks, rhetoric and exorcism, with idleness, illogic, digressions, procrastination, non-articulated affect. This could be followed by argumentations that question the socially determined primacy of action and activity, as does for example Kathrin Busch, who deals with the potential of the non-action, or passivity.[7]

Considerations of the role of artistic work and its non-use as a form of opposition also took place in the Yugoslav concept art. In 1979 the Serbian artist Goran Đorđević planned the General Strike of Artists and tried to persuade colleagues such as Susan Hiller, Hans Haacke or John Latham by letter to join (in vain). And again, even this collection of correspondences on the attempted strike found its way into exhibitions.[8] The refusal to work, that is doomed to fail as an actual collective action, functions without any problems in the refuge of that which is representable as art. Đorđević's project is one of a number of artistic comments on the dialectic between art and work, and the potential of denial inherent in artistic action.

Mladen Stilinović's known work *Artist at Work* of 1977 shows the artist meditating or sleeping in bed. Here, the ambiguity of the concept of work is targeted, the slacker, dreamer, bum identified with the toiling proletariat – until then an unthinkable projection that retrospectively bears a certain prophetic aspect.

At what point between inactivity and activity begins the art work? Is the work of an artist not as closely associated with the identity that its termination would lead to total (rather than just professional) phlegm? And is not the artist who establishes his/her total apathy in public actually right in the middle of work?

Following an actualized reading one might discuss Stilinovic's work in connection with the Bartleby-renaissance of the previous years. Both serve as reference points for passivity, the refusal to work. Melville's anti-hero, the writing assistant Bartleby, realizes his boycott not in the form of programmatic proclamations, but in a stoic process of self-extraction, in the gradual withdrawal from the world of the active, from the socially decreed ratio of productivity and also from its necessary counterpart, leisure. Together with labor, Bartleby also ceases the activity of reproduction through his refusal to leave the work site. Bartleby's exit is not physical, but a boycott of any interaction with the world and with himself.[9]

In contrast, Stilinović's *Artist at Work* is marking the realm of leisure and self-contemplation as the place of work for the artist-subject. However, at the same time, the act of visualization, of media communication, so to say the working out of a conceptual and formal idea, remains a necessary prerequisite for success. Any work that was invested in the production of the documentary material is excluded from the consideration, it remains before us as a strange dilemma, as an unresolved knot in the history of the dematerialization of artistic work.

Dalibor Martini's *Artists on Strike* (1977) consists of the unprimed back of a canvas. However, this screen has no front, but two backs. The second part of the work was a one-day *emballage* of all other works in the group exhibition (the other artists were not consulted). This enigmatic action suggests that a strike among artists is redundant because it misses the heart of the matter. Art will then, and only then, not take place where the channel of its reception is interrupted. Here, one is not under the illusion that a special declaration of cessation would terminate the artistic work, because even this proclamation, this effort of activity of non-activity, reproduces the relationship between the artist and the hegemonic context of representation. According to Martini, the true strike of the artist could only be achieved by a trick, in which the momentum of decision, the (artistic) impulse of action or even the possibility of a showing would be prohibited. In this sense, both Stilinović's and Martini's work appear as forestalled replies to Đorđević's Art Strike.

In most cases, the strike of the artists thus seems to resist its self-destructive tendencies and returns to the realm of the symbolic. The work is taken up in time for the exhibition opening.

The nature of this kind of paradoxical loop of the art strike is brought to the point in a comment found in the appendix to the last YAWN communiqué[10] by Florian Cramer a.k.a. Marty Canterel a.k.a. Keren Elyot (primarily, Cramer's text was dealing with the problem of plagiarism or falsification):

Neoism made intentional use of circular logic and turned it into rhetoric. The Art Strike is the most prominent example of this. The movement's strategy is sited herein, and not in plagiarism. This strategy is blatantly artistic, because it creates a collective identity in place of negation and affirmation of commonly shared fiction.

However, the unmarked, silent and massive exodus, the drifting away, the emergency solutions of real life, are naturally not an artistic finger-pointing, nothing of the sort that would cause such a degree of embarrassment, shock or admiration throughout the art world as the switch of Charlotte Posonenske's to sociology, Andrea Fraser's departure in favor of a psychology degree, etc. The exit is usually so ordinary and banal, so uneventful or mundane, like a bread-and-butter job or unemployment assistance. The resignation in the face of economic circumstances and their internalization as alleged subjective insufficiencies are characteristic of the bio-political and socio-economic context in which the overproduction of cognitive labor through the education-factories, competition and the precarious dependencies of creative freelance entrepreneurs are embedded. So, in the irony of the "circular rhetoric" a kind of strike is accepted, yet the much more urgent question of how to deal with the so-created collective identity (Cramer) continues:

What alliances are to be formed now? Who fills the strike fund?

A massive rejection of a production environment that begins to capitalize the intimate life of its subjects, the individual sensitivity, taste, characteristics, language and desires as well as the relations of social interaction appears as a logical and inevitable wave of the future. But it seems that we are still a long way off.

To be self-exiled, abandoned, is not simple passivity, is it not to be realistic? WE ALL LIVE EVICTED (sez Mike Series)[11]

Howard Slater writes the retreat in his *Secessionist International - Hello The Err*[12] a modified subtext, which seeks to repeal the individualization inherent in the idea of exile. He formulates the exit as controlled, subjectively motivated direction of the many that he identifies as X-O-DUS and thus calling it the name of a mass movement: extract from slavery and foreign rule, and movement into the promised land. Exodus as a disorderly exit from the event and project-based polity of cultural life.

EVACUATE THE EVENT: X-IT FROM PROJECT RECONVENE ELSEWHERE: SMALL CIRCLES[13]

Exodus is here less a spatial movement than an act of gaining communal consciousness, to be understood as self-organization of the *commune*, a call that is not exhausted on individual attention-seeking propaganda actions, but forms identities of groups (cells, hordes, cliques) that withdraw from public view, organize locally, share knowledge, make social and political bonds, which do not exhaust themselves with the performativity of temporary projects.

Tiqqun defines this as a *Human Strike* – in short, the abandoning of acquired patterns of identity, to become opaque – a strike that each and every individual can use to escape from political control, to find other ways to reach each other and create a community that is not reduced to the pre-programmed exploitation of human encounters.[14]

From now on, to be perceived means to be defeated.[15]

Notes:

1. "Depression and anxiety are forms of communication. Some could say they are forms of protest. Something is retaliating, something is happening at a level that is outside our consciousness, our vocabulary, but which we have perceived, been affected by." Howard Slater: *Anomie / Bonhommie*, Mute Books, 2012, S. 116ff.
2. http://www.thisistomorrow.info/viewArticle.aspx?artId=260.
3. The text was a piece from Gustav Metzger's catalog to the exhibition "Art into Society–Society into Art. Seven German Artists", Institute of Contemporary Art, London, 1974.
4. Samuel Dangel: Gustav Metzger – Jahre ohne Kunst?, in: *Gustav Metzger, Years Without Art*, Freiburg 2012, S.37.
5. The YAWN newsletter is archived at this URL: http://yawn.detritus.net/
6. http://www.alytusbiennial.com/constitution.html.
7. Kathrin Busch, *Passivität*, Textem Verlag, 2012.
8. Against Art, SKC/ Student Cultural Center, Belgrad, 1980.
9. See also: Kathrin Busch, page 53 and following. Busch emphasized, however, with recourse to Agamben's Bartleby, passivity as "in the realm of possibility", in the "pure potentiality" while the auto-destructive, pathological trait of the figure remains relatively untreated.
10. http://yawn.detritus.net/pdf/y45_c0_2171-72.pdf
11. Howard Slater: *Anomie / Bonhommie*, 2012.
12. Ibid.
13. Ibid.
14. http://tarnac9.wordpress.com/2009/04/08/human-strike-after-human-strike/#_ftn5.
15. Tiqqun, "How is it to be done?"

Rayya Badran

Life at Mansion: the generative potential of communal living in Beirut

Rayya Badran is a writer and translator who lives and works in Beirut.

On a Wednesday afternoon in May, I was invited to Mansion, a multi-purpose collective space in Beirut, by Lebanese artist Mounira Al Solh, in order to give an informal talk to a large group of art students from Kassel who were on a visit to Beirut. It was a warm spring day and I arrived as dancer, historian, cultural worker and co-founder of Mansion Sandra Iché was talking to the students about Mansion and its history, as she had many times before to visitors. Meanwhile, Lebanese artist and co-founder of Mansion Ghassan Maasri was making lunch in the kitchen with the help of two Mansion residents. Grilled fish, curcuma rice, chilled pea soup and salad were on the menu that day. Mansion hosts lunches every Wednesday, and, on the day I arrived, it was bustling with people. It was a mix of residents, visitors and people who had gone there for lunch and ensuing activity, which included a clay workshop for young children given by Maasri. I was told that it was not a regular day. Visitors were coming in and out of Mansion's many halls and corridors, residents were busy preparing the grill outside, while others worked or conversed on their laptops in the garden outside or on the many chairs and tables in the main hall. Of the many occasions I have visited Mansion since its opening in 2012, that was a particularly vivacious day. I meant to stay a few hours but spent the entire day instead. I spoke with new and old residents, observed the two turtles in the garden's makeshift pond while children flocked around lunchtime with their parents. I wandered in the house's corridors adorned with messages from visitors, booklets and publications of previous events and in the public library. The house's imposing architecture, with its high ceilings, airy rooms and garden, is at once inviting and awe-inspiring.

The story of Mansion began with a walk in the streets of Beirut. Since 2000, Maasri had been walking in Beirut's alleys and streets looking for an old abandoned house that he could transform into a space for artist studios and different cultural activities. After a series of failures to persuade property owners he had met to lend or donate their houses for his project, Maasri stumbled on a mansion from the 1930s while taking a stroll in the historic neighborhood of Zoqaq el Blat. Its name, which translates to "the cobbled alley", described the street that extended from the old city to the Qantari hill in the 19th century that was paved with cobblestones. The Greek Catholic Church Patriarchate, which gave it its other name of Al Batrakieh, and its affiliated school as well as the German Orient Institute are a few of the neighborhood's visible landmarks. Walking along the neighborhood's winding streets, one finds clusters of impressive dilapidated mansions and buildings. Over the past decade, it has witnessed, as most Beirut neighborhoods have, the systematic destruction of its historic buildings by real estate companies, irreversibly transforming its demographic population and character. A constant threat of demolition looms over the few historic houses and buildings that remain, which are in very poor conditions and are threatened of being replaced by residential high rises that have come to characterize the urban landscape of modern-day Beirut. Old Lebanese houses that once populated the coastal cities and villages of Lebanon have become increasingly scarce—endangered relics that the Lebanese state fails to protect. Landowners locally and abroad often wait until they are either insalubrious to live in, or too run down to refurbish, to demolish them and sell the land to developers eager to erect more lucrative high-rises with street-level commercial spaces. The systematic and rampant eradication of Beirut's architectural heritage isn't specific to Zuqaq al-Blat, but is a widespread phenomenon that many activists, architectural historians, and preservationists and lawyers have been continually fighting against.

During the decade or so that succeeded the Lebanese civil war, the city was full of pockets of lived-in or abandoned large mansions or houses in the city. Fifteen years later, these have become lonely islands with lush front and backyards, scattered across a sea of concrete and gated communities.

To understand the significance of a project like Mansion in Beirut, it is critical to unravel the cultural landscape in which it is inscribed — or isolated from. Like most, if not all, art and culture organizations that emerged since the 1990s, Mansion was born of the absence of state infrastructure. Emerging from fifteen years of devastating violence and destruction, Lebanon's public sector and its state institutions remain inefficient, corrupt, and grossly underfunded. The private sector, on the other hand, was allowed to flourish unregulated for years, communities fueled by neoliberal politics and an utter disregard for public and civic life. The absence of a consolidated reconstruction project also contributed to the city's deeply unjust urban and housing sectors. Numerous warnings by intellectuals, historians, and writers about the fate of Beirut, from the blind erasure of the city to the self-imposed amnesia, were never heeded.[1] Now buried under billions of dollars in public debt and steered by corrupt and crumbling public institutions, the country is entering a period of deep economic crisis — a word we are so accustomed to hearing these days, and which will ultimately define our times.

But Lebanon was never really doing well to begin with. The infrastructure for art and culture was virtually nonexistent. What sprung from this void were groups of young artists, writers, and cultural practitioners who formed NGOs, organizations, and spaces through which to produce art, cinema, performances, theatre and music. The infrastructure for art and culture that we know today was largely built on the dedication of collectives and individuals who helped build the current, and some short-lived, institutions that constitute the artistic fabric of this city. Since the 1990s, art spaces and institutions such as Ashkal Alwan, the Arab Image Foundation, the Beirut Art Center, Beirut DC, Zico House, and many others, were registered as non-profits or non-governmental entities, in part because it was the only legal status available for such collectives to adopt, but also because it allowed them to receive funding from both local and international institutions and donors. Maasri was very much a part of this rich history. He belongs to the generation of contemporary artists whose

practices, during the post-war period, touched on topics like the war, memory, and the limits of representation, to name but a few.

In 2005, he organized AIWA (Artists' International Workshop: Aley) with artist Tamara Al-Samerraei a two-week workshop and exhibition in his hometown of Aley with 20 artists from countries as near as Syria and as far as China. He wanted to emulate the experiences he and Al-Samerraei had during a workshop in England where they met with a large group of artists for intense periods of work and exchange. The many artists were hosted by neighbors and in Maasri's home. One could say that Mansion was the natural extension of Maasri's desire to reproduce moments of encounter and collective work. When critic Kaelen Wilson-Goldie reported on the workshop and exhibition, she foresaw Maasri's quest to replicate this experience elsewhere, remarking that the workshop reflected "the more organic and generative end of Lebanon's post-war reconstruction process, whereby wrecked spaces slowly transform into places with potential."[2]

After Maasri found Mansion early in 2012, he visited to inspect the house a couple of times. One day, a doorman from a nearby building noticed him and asked whether he wanted to meet the owner, who lived nearby. With no expectations in mind, he finally met the owner, Imad Fawaz, a local business man. Although he had wanted to sell the mansion, he couldn't. The two men held several meetings during which a reciprocal affinity started to grow. Iché then sketched out a proposal with Maasri and shared it with Fawaz, who agreed on lending them the mansion — a rare act of benevolence — for them to carry out their activities. Mansion is a typical Ottoman-era Lebanese house, which is famous for its three arcades and Marseille-tiled roofs. The main large hall on the ground floor opens onto a generous garden shaded by a big Jacaranda and loquat trees. The house needed a lot of work, having been abandoned since the 1980s as the Lebanese civil war raged. After Maasri came to an agreement with Fawaz to use the mansion, he and Iché started working on refurbishing it with five other people who later became permanent residents. Maasri and Fawaz signed an agreement for one year, which has been renewed verbally since. They installed and fixed electrical wires, sorted out the water, cleaned the very large space on top of many other laborious tasks. The preservation of the architectural heritage and the environment were of paramount importance at a juncture during which the space was articulated as a space for artistic practices. When I interviewed Iché and Maasri in 2013 about their project, Iché mentioned that Mansion was created "to propose an alternative to the white cube […] such [abandoned] structures, produced in many ways by some sort of failure, present substantial possibilities for art production, artistic encounters and accessibility".[3] The act of preservation in itself gives rise to some ambivalence. Is what results from preservation necessarily better than what might emerge from the contingencies of vacancy, disintegration and finitude? When we say, it's too soon to tell if these projects are for the better, do we even know what we consider to be good or bad?

During that time, Iché and Maasri lived at Mansion and stayed there until 2016. Maasri then solicited a close circle of friends inviting them to take up the many rooms on offer. The rents they asked were very low, 200$ or less per room, and contributed entirely to the upkeep and necessities of the house. People started to occupy Mansion over the years. Some of the residents here today were a part of it from the start, like artist and animator Ghassan Halwani, and graphic designer Aymnan Hassan from Studio Zumra, both of whom I spoke with on that beautiful spring day. Others stayed for shorter or intermittent terms. They came from different fields and disciplines and were responsible for their own rooms as well as for the shared space. While Iché and Maasri lived and worked on the house, others used the studio spaces for work, meetings, or workshops, depending on the size of the rooms and if their work involved programming activities or events, they would plan them at Mansion. The sprawling space has now reached its full capacity, with twenty three permanent residents. Only one small room is vacant and I was told that there is already a waiting list. Artists, curators, NGOs and associations such as Public Works and Al Jibal, architects, activists, and others occupy, the current configuration of Mansion. As such, all the members incorporate their different fields of expertise in improving or shaping the life of the house, oftentimes using the shared space to program events and activities. The latter include loquat picking, carpentry and gardening for adults and children, printmaking, concerts, artist talks, film screenings, garage sales, and dance and yoga classes. The library is composed of found and donated books and the reading space is open for public use. There is also a guest-room, or a "residency room" dedicated to short-time users or residents. A portion of the second floor's shared space has a large wooden floor to host dance and theatre rehearsals, performances and yoga classes.

Like most art institutions and organizations in Beirut, the project began in an informal and non-hierarchical dynamic; everyone had input into how it would be run and decisions were made not by casting votes, but by reaching consensus, often to the chagrin of some who bemoan the long periods of time it took to resolve simple issues. But unlike the others, Mansion did not become an organization or association, both in the legal and practical sense. It did not contour an artistic vision through its programs, although a lot of art is produced there, either by individual artists occupying studio spaces or temporary exhibitions. It does not assert a particular identity although it is a question that keeps returning and nagging residents. Many people who rented out spaces for shorter terms remained part of the conversation about the future of Mansion and its organization because they felt attached to its people and cause. While thinking about what this space can become, Iché and Maasri's approach was to propose a tool from which people could benefit. The house's energy was fueled by the dynamic and desires of its resi-

dents. Both its former and current residents are committed to the collective and the participatory work that it involves. It doesn't always run smoothly or quickly, but it seems that after seven years, they succeeded in creating a communal and free space in which many different approaches and philosophies come together (and collide) to enliven a space others would have deemed dead. While Mansion hosts an eclectic roster of events, it does not force activities inside the shared space either — decidedly a shift from the initial drive of dedicating it to art. Since most residents use the space for work, any program such as an exhibition, public talk or screening, musical and dance performances or yoga classes must ultimately benefit both hosts and guests; it is crucial to work *with*, not *at*, Mansion. As a house and collective, it does not plan events but regularly hosts artists and organizations to install short-term exhibitions, programs, screenings, workshops and classes. Refraining to adhere to the prevalent periodization of curated programs was a position they had taken in order to avoid the space being treated as a backdrop by people coming from the outside. Recent propositions from individuals or companies such as Uber to film or set up photoshoots at Mansion have been refused, partly because they do not wish to monetize relationships with others by renting the shared space, but they fail to see how these projects benefit the house or its residents. However, organizations such as the Heinrich Böll Stiftung and others often make use of Mansion's spaces. Residents like Ayman Hassan insists on the idea that these activities must always take into account the space itself — its communal nature and the richness of its residents and their contributions. Programs held at Mansion by individuals or groups alike are prompted to keep the space free, to recycle, to be frugal, and to collaborate with the permanent residents. People's willingness to adhere to these points helps Mansion determine what kind of programs they wish to host or not.

One of the challenges evoked by Iché and Maasri was how Mansion could draw people in while avoiding hand-picking individuals in order to sustain the organic fluidity. It is a discussion residents continually have during their regular meetings. Mansion defies categorization precisely because it wants to remain open to different possibilities. The aim was to build a space in which disagreements are possible and where personal contributions take different forms; those also include personal desires projected onto Mansion. Iché qualified these discussions, meetings, and overall "choreography" as "invisible labor". A recent encounter with Henriette Sorenson, an intern who came to Mansion for four months, motivated the residents to structure the functional aspects of the house. Monthly meetings were established to address the concerns, frustrations, and logistics of the residents and gave them space to discuss the balance between the public nature of the house with the privacy of the residents' studios and in one case, home.

Unsurprisingly, it took pains to implement them. They geared towards what Iché described as "building habits", or as one resident put it: a "how to Mansion". Issues such as recycling, internet, and other necessities for the house slowly came into place. The first phase of "building habits" related to infrastructure and negotiating cohabitation. The second phase concerned the habits of residents themselves. Although this was rare, some residents were asked to leave if they rarely occupied or didn't engage the space or others. Mansion offers studios and rooms but it also demands a different mode of attention, one that requires a commitment to ongoing conversations, however long and dreary they might be. To illustrate this last point, Iché remembered that it once took six long months to resolve whether or not to keep a stray cat — they did, and its name is Smokes. When I mentioned this to other residents, it was met with sigh and knowing smiles, almost surrendering to the slowness and, to some, interminable points of discussion.

Because decision-making is slow, consensual and collective, very tiny problems prompt more existential and identitarian questions.

In many ways, Mansion goes against the grain of the now prevalent contemporary workspaces that provide shared offices and spaces, which advertise "hot desks", "specialized studios" to "monetize every sqm" of a property. Mansion is not "managed" but nurtured. It would be equally reductive to call it another art space or organization. If an alternative and art-leaning space endures the test of time, does it become an institution?

The impulse that created Mansion in the first place was to push back against the monetization of every aspect of life in Beirut. This approach resulted in Mansion's resistance to forming a singular identity, which is a point that residents continually return to. "What is this place?" is a question that was often asked even in the early days of Mansion, but remains, seven years later, unanswered — perhaps there is more than just one. When Ayman Hassan from Studio Zumra mentioned this quest for identity, he intimated that since the beginning, the group sought to articulate the tone of the space. "Who does it want?", he asked. Another point he mentioned, which came up when the house included only half of its residents today, related to archiving and documenting the activities at Mansion. How and what does it archive? And what are the potential uses of this documentation? This presented itself as a potential tool to unpack its methodology, its errors and failures but also unraveled a sense of ambivalence about the nature of the space. If it resisted taking on one identity, what narrative will the archives relate to? What is the language through which we speak of Mansion? Is it even important to keep traces of something that resists stillness or stuckness? Although Hassan was adamant that "revision was not a wasted effort", do these unanswered points become burdens over time?

However nagging these issues may be for some of the residents at Mansion, what it communicated to the outside could be viewed as a welcome relief to the need to form identitarian lines across many fields and aspects of art and culture in Beirut. While all other institutions and spaces are concerned with carving very precise identities and missions that distinguish them from

each other, Mansion is still thinking about whether an identity is necessary at all. If it had to shape one, what could it possibly be? Its relationship to work, time and communication are not determined by external factors. It moves to the beat of its residents' rhythms. Time is crucial there. As I entered the house and garden on that day, I could get a sense of prolonged time. The whirlwind of Beirut is left at the door. Even on a busy day, Mansion affords you a quietude that is becoming rare in the city. It's infectious even for visitors. Different conversations and encounters between residents often fuel their respective work and in return the work gives back to the house. When I sat down with Ghassan Halwani and Ayman Hassan in the latter's ground floor studio after my talk, Halwani joked that going to the kitchen to fetch water was dangerous because it once took him forty-five minutes. There are interruptions to contend with, especially when the house is beaming with activities and people. It's hard to resist the bustle outside the studio walls. In this respect, those who occupy the above floors are at an advantage because they are more secluded.

Last October marked a significant turn when Iché and Maasri decided to leave for Marseille with their young son Nael. It presented an opportunity to reflect on the maturation of Mansion and its urgency in these times for everyone involved. It was also the moment when the collective governance and internal economy would be structured through the formation of committees. These include the typical categories found in most NGOs, associations or non-profits — although residents use different names for them all the time. The maintenance committee oversees issues pertaining to the physical and logistical aspects of the house itself; the events committee manages invitations by curators, activists, organizations to plan an event at Mansion and the needs of the residents and their respective working spaces. Other committees such as outreach and treasury also divide the many tasks that Mansion requires to stay alive. Like many decisions at Mansion, this one took a long time to make. It comes at a critical moment when the two people who started it have decided to leave the country. They will still be a part of its fabric and decision-making process (its life) but only from afar. An ultimate test one should think since virtually all of the art and culture organizations in Beirut are associated with/depend on a sole person, oftentimes to ensure that their visions and tones remain intact over time. While Iché and Maasri are two of the more visible members of Mansion, the space no longer depends on them.

This new era Mansion is entering is meant to be a "testing phase" and a "pool of values", Iché claims. The space wishes to prove to a city so expensive and gain-oriented that a place such as this one can have political and cultural values, that it can achieve its initial ambition to create a legal precedent to change Lebanese property laws. This ongoing experience, they hope, will serve as a model or a blueprint for lawmakers and urbanists to encourage landowners to shift the function of their abandoned houses across the city by implementing new laws or agreements and perhaps introduce a form of taxation if they are to be vacant. In the current agreement that Maasri and Iché have with Imad Fawaz, neither the occupants or the owner are protected under any law. Fawaz does not benefit from any subsidy or help from the municipality to keep this project afloat. Iché hopes that the current generosity of Mr Fawaz might turn him into a potential ally and eventually help them lobby for better legal protection. While the communal nature of the project is important to cling to, there is a looming question: will it have consequences that radiate outward? Is it even important that it do so, or is there a need for relatively hermetic, closed spaces of production, a spatial politics to be found outside the discourses of transparency, visibility and openness and more oriented towards the (no less far reaching) potentialities of intimate, temporary affinity?

One of the most radical acts an institution in Lebanon can do is change the very fabric of the city — to change urban typologies themselves, not merely through content. It is born from something that comes before content, via the proposal of an alternative legal status. When so many organizations unwillingly extended trends of gentrification to parts of Beirut, Mansion is in some sense a "work", as an artwork almost, about/within/acting on the city. After we talked about the uniqueness of Mansion in imposing its own time, Halwani said that "uniqueness is not necessarily good, it isolates you". After losing track of time in Hassan's studio around sunset, I readied myself to leave thinking about this mordant final sentence that Halwani concluded with, about whether we need to rethink the ways in which Mansion shields its residents from the tensions of Beirut and to what extent one needs to outwardly radiate its uniqueness to effect change.

NOTES:

1. For a compelling history of the intellectual and political discourse around memory and reconstruction in the 1990s, see Khaled Saghieh, "1990s Beirut: *Al Mulhaq,* Memory and the Defeat", e-flux, February 2019, https://www.e-flux.com/journal/97/250527/1990s-beirut-al-mulhaq-memory-and-the-defeat/.

2. Wilson-Goldie, Kaelen, "Aiwa! Artists head for higher ground", *The Daily Star*, September 30, 2005, accessed May 2019, http://www.dailystar.com.lb/ArticlePrint.aspx?id=98652&mode=print.

3. Sandra Iché, e-mail message to the author, January 11, 2013, accessed May 2019.

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GRETA THUNBERG'S ACCEPTANCE SPEECH AT THE GOLDENE KAMERA AWARDS, BERLIN 2019

I dedicate this award to the people fighting to protect the Hambach Forest. And to activists everywhere who are fighting to keep the fossil fuels in the ground.

We live in a strange world. Where all the united science tells us that we are about 11 years away from setting off an irreversible chain reaction way beyond human control that will probably be the end of our civilization as we know it.

We live in a strange world where children must sacrifice their own education in order to protest against the destruction of their future.

Where the people who have contributed the least to this crisis are the ones who are going to be affected the most.

Where politicians say it's too expensive to save the world, while spending trillions of euros subsidizing fossil fuels.

We live in a strange world where no one dares to look beyond our current political systems even though it's clear that the answers we seek will not be found within the politics of today.

Where some people seem to be more concerned about the presence in school of some children than the future of humankind.

Where everyone can choose their own reality and buy their own truth.

Where our survival is depending on a small, rapidly disappearing carbon budget. And hardly anyone even knows it exists.

We live in a strange world. Where we think we can buy or build our way out of a crisis that has been created by buying and building things.

Where a football game or a film gala gets more media attention than the biggest crisis humanity has ever faced.

Where celebrities, film and pop-stars who have stood up against all injustices will not stand up for our environment and for climate justice because that would inflict on their right to fly around the world visiting their favorite restaurants, beaches and yoga retreats.

Avoiding catastrophic climate breakdown is to do the seemingly impossible. And that is what we have to do.

But here is the truth: we can't do it without you in the audience here tonight.

People see you celebrities as Gods. You influence billions of people. We need you.

You can use your voice to raise awareness about this global crisis. You can help turn individuals into movements. You can help us wake up our leaders – and let them know that our house is on fire.

We live in a strange world.
But it's the world that my generation has been handed. It's the only world we've got.
We are now standing at a crossroads in history.
We are failing but we have not yet failed.
We can still fix this.
It's up to us.

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Greta Thunberg, Climate Activist was awarded The Special Prize for Climate Protection at the 2019 Goldene Kamera Awards in Berlin, 30 March.