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How do the Commons Look like? An incomlpete story from a slow metamorphosis of becoming Casco Art Institute: Working for the Commons

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## How do the Commons Look like? An incomplete story from a slow metamorphosis of becoming Casco Art Institute: Working for the Commons Binna Choi

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1.

"The plethora of images" is an expression that stuck in my head from reading the curatorial statement by Catherin David for the 1997 Documenta X. That felt like the defining term of the late nineties and gave all the reasons for art to be, while also giving it a way to survive. I'm not sure how successful art became for that mission by giving critical analysis, antidotes and alternative imaginaries to the plethora of images since the media industries have been only expanding and ubiquitous with apps and social media. For sure, since then, we have passed several turns and "trends" concerning contemporary art production, such as the social, relational, educational turns, in which art has come to focus on the act of imagination, rather than the visual production. Now, what we in art deal with is less of the spectacle itself but another kind of a plethora of which cannot be well captured in the optical or visual regime or contained in the visual cultural realm. Climate change and the planetary catastrophes, political extremism, war, and massive migrations, and every day over production/consumption/extraction (also think of data mining) and the "Institutional critique" was established as an artistic genre in the late 60s and has been evolving in the 90s and 2000s with the notions like new institutionalism. That is to indicate that some of the art institutions themselves took on the role of critique to the art institution, the institution of art on which the category of art relies, and the institution in general. The present attention to the art institution could be seen in this lineage yet in practice there are many differences and another "new" to be noticed. One notable distinction is the adaptation of the discourse and practice of "the commons." Autonomy and self-organization are other neighboring buzzwords, but to me the commons better captures what's at stake, giving the orientation as well as means for new forms of organizing. Several art organizations have taken on the commons as their focus, including the Nam June Paik Art Center, TimeLab in Ghent, Casa do Povo in Sao Paolo,

<sup>1</sup> To indicate this "turn", I can list some of the most recent discursive occasions I had an opportunity to contribute include, How Institutions Think at Arles Foundation in Arles, organized by Center for Curatorial Studies, Bard College in New York; De Appel Curatorial program in Amsterdam (Feb 2016); Rethinking Institutional Critique: A View from the South at the Athens Biennale (Apr 2016); Perpetual Invention: Searching for Institutional Practice at Hordaland Kunstsenter in Bergen (Dec 2016); To All the Contributing Factors, 11th Gwangju Biennale (Sept 2016); Autonomous Fabric at Willem de Kooning Academy Rotterdam (Feb 2017); Desiring institutions March Meeting, at the Sharjah Biennale 2017, (Sharjah, March 2016); Art, Art Publics, and the Public Sphere, Nieuw Dakota / Valiz, Amsterdam (June 2017); De-colonizing Art Institutions at the Postgraduate Program in Curating at the ZHdK, with the Museum für Gegenwartskunst in Basel (June 2017); The Agency of Art at Office for Contemporary Art Norway (OCA), Oslo, organized by Foreningen af Kunsthaller i Danmark, Klister in Sverige and Kunsthallene i Norge (March 2018).

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Picha Art Center in Lubumbashi, KUNCI Cultural Studies Center in Yogyakarta, and Ker Thiossane in Dakar.

I would like to elaborate on why it is so as well as some thoughts and possibilities on how art and art institution could work on and for the commons. I would do this by examining "Casco," a non-profit art institution based in Utrecht, the Netherlands, where I have been working as a director since 2008. About ten years after I started working there, our board and team were determined to bring an institutional shift in which the commons act as the central focus of the institutional mission and the core principle for its operation. This might be said as a direct consequence of working on the program that researches the commons - "Composing the Commons" or the longer trajectory of the institution. "Casco" was established in Utrecht in 1990 by three local artists and art historians as a non-profit foundation and gallery for a brief mission of presenting art for the public, yes, with the one-word name Casco. In Dutch, "Casco" refers to a building still incomplete and awaiting the installation of its components like floors and windows, meaning an open and flexible structure in the process of becoming a completed building. The name works. Casco as an art institution has been acting like such a structure by moving along an ongoing selftransformative path in response to the development of contemporary art and society. The first visible renewal took place after a five-year cycle of exhibitions and events. In 1996, Casco appointed the position of directorship and adopted a trans-disciplinary and project-orientated program of trifold structure: Projects, Salon (discursive platform), and Issues (publication). From then on Casco was mostly named Casco Projects. In 2003, it gave itself a new, official subtitle, Office for Art, Design and Theory, highlighting its international, trans-disciplinary, and collaborative character. In 2018, we re-launched "Casco" as Casco Art Institute: Working for the Commons.

2.

Before taking a journey on the story of "becoming" of Casco as Casco Art Institute: Working for the Commons, I don't think I can avoid this question. What are the commons? Ironically the concept of the commons seems to be popular but not so common in the

understanding and use. Indeed, it's a buzzword that resonates and at the same time confuses many. In brief, the commons can be defined as a collectively managed common resource with a certain autonomous rule of that managing community, from the tangible objects, such as land, to the intangible such as knowledge and culture. 2 Keeping this definition in mind, a collective farm under the communist regime could well be distinguished from the commons as the rules are not created by those who labor on the farm. A gated community could well be the commons but not. It might be comparable to the cases of Air B&B or Uber, which constitute the so-called "sharing economy." They become popular, adopted by the state to promote, and often treated as the synonym of the commons. Korean political scientist Hyo Jeong Chai3 argues how the sharing economy and commons is not actually for "sharing" and elucidates the four reasons. The first reason is the commons are what belong to everybody and everyone. The commons in Uber is merely the sum of each own resource. This sum is not shared but only the information on each own resource. Secondly, the rules of management are created by the ones who create the platforms, not by the users. Thirdly, the "profits" from the platform are not shared for the community – again this is for mere individual profits, which leads to the last point that those platforms do not cultivate or sustain relations and their qualities like trust. In fact, at the bottom of the blockchain technology, a key figure in the trend of the sharing economy, lies technology to ensure trust, instead of unreliable human relations. On these grounds, Chai concludes:

Nowadays, a sharing economy is a new stage and another name of privatization. The slogan "Let's share instead of possessing - In fact, lets' borrow" sounds like a praise of non-possession of individuals, but it conceals the avoidance of employment and irresponsibility of capital in reality. At the same time, it justifies the techniques of isolating and incapacitating individuals through a symbolic manipulation of 'sharing' by depriving them

<sup>2</sup> Thanks to the founder of P2P foundation Michel Bauwens.

<sup>3</sup> Hyo Jeong, Chai, "Sharing Economy", Workers 47, October 23, 2018, available at www.workers-zine.net/29544

of solidarity and relationship. Not everything with a form of sharing only can be regarded as sharing; philosophy and value of sharing are required. From the beginning, a sharing economy was a mistranslated term and its indiscriminate use has caused great confusion. Therefore, its original concept of sharing has been damaged. What we call a sharing economy now is nothing but a methodological innovation of making a form of sharing to be traded in the market. It is 'an economy destroying sharing' as well as a 'marketization of sharing.'

In my view, this "big chaos" created by the misuse of the notion of sharing, and possibly the notion of the commons is not only negative or positive. Instead we can see them making a paradigm shift, which evokes each single citizen to recognize their agencies and challenges the concentrated power and authority that the state and institutions have enjoyed. We could call this paradigm shift as the commons. The question is whether we would leverage this to another advanced level of privatization and capitalism or something radically different that stops the exploitation of the earth and body and affirms the joy of life for more. So again, we have to make a distinction in the notion of the commons. Rather we need to refine it as we use the commons. Italian legal scholar and activist Ugo Mattei4 gives a relevant framework for the commons, by positioning it in the Western legal tradition or "a legality that is founded on the universalizing and exhaustive combination of individualism with the State/private property dichotomy." Furthermore, his crucial insight is in articulating the fabricated clear-cut opposition between the state and the private is in fact made in an even more fundamental hierarchal, binary structure, "the rule of a subject (an individual, a company, the government) over an object (a private good, an organization, a territory)." The commons are conceived beyond the objects-resources, he continues to argue:

Commons lie beyond the reductionist opposition of "subjectobject," which produces the commodification of both. Commons,

<sup>4</sup> Ugo Mattei, "The State, the Market, and some Preliminary Question about the Commons (French and English Version)" (2011). Available at www.works.bepress.com/ugo\_mattei/40

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unlike private goods and public goods, are not commodities and cannot be reduced to the language of ownership. They express a qualitative relation. It would be reductive to say that we have a common good: we should rather see to what extent we are the commons, in as much as we are part of an environment, an urban or rural ecosystem. Here, the subject is part of the object. For this reason, commons are inseparably related and link individuals, communities, and the ecosystem itself.

On this basis, the critical task for the commons is to set up "a qualitative relation" that connects many, from individual human beings to institutions, companies and even to the earth itself. Yet, how? We know it's a daunting task. The relationality is not always pleasant as in the "relational aesthetics" and can be peaceful as dreamed with the satellite image of the "whole earth" transmitted to the world in the 60s hippie culture. The commons often accompany a circle shape to represent themselves. The circle gives an idea of the holistic completeness and integrity. However, we may better imagine the commons in an indefinite, non-static grid structure. Although the grid might be considered a shape of control, like Excel sheets making things quantifiable and calculable, we also can use it for caring – sometimes strategic - attentiveness to various human and non-human actors, situations and environments. Or think of another image-shape of the commons. Belgian philosopher Pascal Gielen who designates the commons as a new radical, practice-based ideology again reconfiguring many binary and oppositional relations, imagines the commons as monsters. Eventually a forbidden love:5

Compared to the smooth and monochromatic, marble aesthetics of neoliberalism and virtual capital, commonism, at first sight, seems to be giving birth to a particularly ungainly child. What it presents is truly a monster, reconciling everything that is in fact irreconcilable. Those who immerse themselves in social life for the first time indeed tend to miss the simplicity of numbers,

<sup>5</sup> Pascal Gielen, "Common Aesthetics: The Shape of a New Meta-Ideology", *Commonism: A new Aesthetics of the Real.* eds. Nico Docks & Pascal Gielen, Valiz, 2018, pp. 80-81.

Yet is the love, especially that forbidden love, a visible matter? Does it have a shape? What do the commons look like?

## 3.

The program at Casco Art Institute for last few years, especially under the program title "Composing the Commons," has been a process of searching for clarity of the definition and the practical methodologies of the commons. Along with the conception of (research) projects, the commission or co-production of artworks led by artists, divergent forms of public programs, we came to map out the various notions and aspect of the commons. It was however yet before we more consciously explore the relation between art and the commons: art was taken as the means for the above mentioned research. Furthermore, even before consciously studying the commons, we started using the term, which drew us into the commons venture and brought the basis for all the possible definitions of the commons. It was through the long-term project Grand Domestic Revolution we develop since the end of 2009 till 2012.

The project was driven by the famous feminist tenet "Personal is Political" and wanted to investigate what was going on in the contemporary domestic space. Teasing out the public and the private boundaries, we sought the possibility of social change from within the home space. For this, we "ran" an actual domestic space, a 50 square meter flat next to our building - as a project space and started inviting

artists and other practitioners for residency and interventions into the flat, both as a physical and symbolic space. Together with them, we were finding how the public and the private were divided and related, recognizing the rapid privatization of housing in the Netherlands and exploring different ways of collective artistic creation and actions to question and intervene. The main inspiration throughout was the late 19th century feminist movement in the US which was researched and published by American architecture historian Dolores Hayden who referred to the movement as the "Grand Domestic Revolution." At the turn of the century, there were attempts to collectivize so-called "women's labor" such as childcare, cooking, and laundry as to influence the spatial design including home and cities. Touching upon the various issues around the contemporary domestic space, it was not a coincidence that what became central for the project is domestic labor.

While finding out the power of domesticity – cooking together, sharing such space – for the formation of interpersonal relations and their collectivity, the question of labor, even the division between work, labor and artworks has occupied us. Speaking of women's labor, even in a seemingly progressive country like the Netherlands, it turned it was still women who do most of the domestic labor. At the same time, in place of more women who are now in the so-called "productive" workforces and in a position of power, have been a significant number of migrant workers who clean, cook, and take care of the children of working parents. The problem is that the domestic, reproductive works, whether women or migrant workers do them, are not still as valued as other work, as many of those migrant workers living and working "illegally" and being underpaid - under the basic wage - tell. At that time, the domestic workers in the Netherlands began to collectivize with the trade unions. A group of artists and other practitioners through the project, including artists Matthijs de Bruijne, Werker Magazine, and Annette Krauss, also began relationships with the workers in the movement, which resulted in a collaborative video piece and some campaign materials. These relation still exist and have been finding various minor moments of exchange and support, than projects.

Through and through this, we cannot help but take the commons from a feminist perspective, as one of the co-founders of Wage for Housework movement, Silvia Federici, elaborated on. Critiquing the idea that knowledge organized through the Internet and other digital technology is the natural condition for the commons without asking the materials basis and economic activities such as mining, microchips, and rare earth production, she argues it's important to focus on the reproduction of everyday life, as inseparable from production. She brought to light her invaluable observation that it was the colonial-capitalist venture that increased the division and separation between productive labor and reproductive, domestic labor while devaluing and making invisible the latter. Federici, arguing for collectivization of housework, food production, land and waters, and so on, tells us how the commons can be the basis for an alternative to a capitalist economy:6

... the "commoning" of the material means of reproduction is the primary mechanism by which a collective interest and mutual bonds are created.

... For the distancing of production from reproduction and consumption leads us to ignore the conditions under which what we eat or wear, or work with, have been produced, their social and environmental cost, and the fate of the population on whom the waste we produce is unloaded.

We may call this "reproductive commons" for the sake of simplicity. Here, besides the images we collectively created, we can invite another work of art that remains the inspiration for the Grand Domestic Revolution. American artist Mierel Laderman Ukeles published a text piece "Manifesto for Maintenance Art 1969!, Proposal for an exhibition 'Care'"(1969) with the subsequent series of her performances of doing maintenance work herself at home or museums and photo

<sup>6</sup> Silvia Federici, "Feminism and the Politics of the Common in an Era of Primitive Accumulation", published *Revolution at Point Zero*, PM Press, 2012 and *Grand Domestic Revolution Handbook*, Casco & Valiz, 2014.

documentation. By claiming her domestic labor as art, she makes an argument of its value to the extent of the care and maintenance for the earth.

## 4.

What is after the Grand Domestic Revolution? With the "reproductive commons" in mind, we have realized that we'd need to delve into the commons. The co-creation and cooperative works were not all smooth, and we'd better build further knowledge on what enables collectivities, rather than organizing it with blind love, and on how to practice the commons. Hence, the program "Composing the Commons" as a multiyear research trajectory (2013-2016) was conceived. The program unfolded with the artists whom we invited exploring various possible historical and contemporary strands for the commons practice as well as with the collective research projects. Among them some artists were already familiar with the existing discourse and practice of the commons, contributing to the articulation of our positions in relation with the commons. For example, artist Adelita Husni-Bey conceived the project White Paper: Law with us, which organized a series of joint drafting sessions of a legal document to challenge the recent law that banned/illegalized squatting in the Netherlands. The unfamiliar language for art, that's the law, was met with artistic imagination for another kind of organization and ownership of space yet with the participation of various positions and actors with regards to squatting: from lawyers and anthropologists to squatters, activists for refugees and a formerly squatted old art studio complex. The project resulted in the "Convention for the Use of Space" which is made available on a special website as well as in art form in which Husni-Bey revisualized the co-writing process in collaboration with a local printing collective Kapitaal. This project not only continued the query from The Grand Domestic Revolution, which dealt with the squatting ban that happened at the very moment of the project development. It also brought us to introduce and exercise what theorist Marina Vishmidt

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called "militant commons." 7 She argues that rather than creating an autonomous realm of collective organization and takes a refugee in it, the commons should act to intervene and change the existing legal system and institutions.

Fernando Garcia Dory's Inland, Christian Nyampeta's How to Live Together, Aimee Zito Lema's Body at Work, Mellanie Gilligan's Common Sense, The Otolith Group's In the Year of Quiet Sun, Ayreen Anastasi & Rene Gabri's Commoning Time, I cannot even name all the projects here, but they show how artists could facilitate and stir forms of cooperation with other social actors and communities, and let us map out the broad terrain of the commons geographically, historically, and politically. Importantly, the artists and growing communities around not only shaped the program Composing the Commons but also the organization to a certain degree. In fact, more and more artists through this long-term development became closer to the organization too and communities started using Casco's space and facilities for their gatherings. Along with this, more and more remarks on the organization were made in relation to the knowledge on the commons it produces. In other words, how much is your organization the commons?

5.

In "Composing the Commons," two "projects" may well be singled out to address this issue of art institutions not only representing the commons but becoming the commons. One is Site for Unlearning (Art Organization), a collaborative project by the shifting, entire Casco team and Annette Krauss, Utrecht based artist whom Casco has been working together for a long while for several different projects, and Arts Collaboratory, a network project with 23 art organizations all of which are based in so-called "Global South." Casco first joined the network as an associate partner to facilitate the "networking" process and later joined as one of its members. Both projects are inter-twined as uroboros and have in common their work on the wide spectrum of

<sup>7</sup> Marina Vishdmit, "All Shall Be Unicorns: About Commons, Aesthetics and Time" (2014), Commonist Aesthetics, eds. Binna Choi, Sven Lutticken, Jorinde Seijdel, available at www.onlineopen.org/all-shall-be-unicorns.

art from the formal aesthetics to rather invisible work of imagination for another kind of social imaginary towards the commons. Here how do the commons get *configured*?

The Site for Unlearning is based on long-term artistic research by Annette Krauss which problematizes the accumulative, capitalist notion of learning along with the idea that learning always gets embodied. Hence, she put forwards unlearning as a requisite for learning which has to do with changing habits – not only of doing but also of thinking. With Site for Unlearning (Art Organization), Annette and our team agreed on taking Casco as a case study. As with other unlearning cases, what to unlearn and the unlearning process especially with the idea of practicing the commons within an art institution has been collective throughout. The collective finding led us to unlearn "busyness," and as we analyzed further, the capitalist value of productivity as the root of such temporality, that keeps us from appreciating reproductive labor from maintenance work to relations among the team. The project proceeded with two or three weekly collective meetings to come up with ideas of exercises for unlearning and reflect on them after trying those exercises. Those exercises include weekly collective cleaning of our office gallery which now has become the expanded habit of our organization, to rethinking of the wage system and organizing collective planning and learning moments. 8 These are certainly behind the reshaping of Casco to the present in many and interlinked ways. Above all, unlearning busyness, such temporality and the underlying logic of productivity, has been manifest in proclaiming where our commitment and social vision with art lie in - the commons - and the possible drive by this commitment to the organization, from the team members to the extended teams, collaborators and communities to engage with, to operate with the commons as well as proliferate the commons. In other words, commoning has become a process of materializing the above mentioned learn knowledge of commoning such as reproductive commons and militant commons through the ongoing unlearning process.

The Arts Collaboratory network might be seen a similar effort

<sup>8</sup> Unlearning Exercises: Art Organizations as Sites for Unlearning, Casco Art Institute/Valiz, eds. Binna Choi, Annette Krauss, Yolande van der Heide, 2018.

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as Site for Unlearning (Art Organizations) in a broader collective dimension in search of modes of solidarity to practice. Since 2013, Arts Collaboratory has been undergoing an experimental process of transforming itself from an artificially constructed network brought together by funders into an interdependent and trans-local cooperative ecosystem operating in solidarity with each other and each other's networks. Such experimentation is slowly garnered through mutual trust, shared resources, and responsibilities, in order to achieve a common wealth and to become practically and actively engaged in "paradigm shifts" concerning the way successes of member organizations have been judged in the funder-fundee relation. This relation is especially important given that most of the AC member organizations work under the legacy of colonial heritage and its persistence. They also get their funding resources from the West, in particular, the Netherlands, which consciously and unconsciously embodies the exploitative, judgmental, controlling mechanism rooted in the colonizer. And so, the colonizer-colonized relation continues, keeping the organization's production and presentation machinery running without space for questioning its fundamental structures or for radically imagining an alternative reality of relations through which to produce and present (which meet the desire from Casco's own unlearning project). To transform it is thus to collectively reimagine a future vision complete with a set of ethical principles for guidance in the process of self-governance. AC's co-written future plan, for example, was used to convince our primary funders to relinquish their control, in practical terms, of the system of judgment, selection, and progress and evaluation reports, allowing instead for AC to report to one another without dressing it up and to also be transparent when it comes to struggles and failures, and all in the spirit of self-governance and collective study.

Speaking of the study, another aspect of the commons that has become crucial for both projects alike is so-called "the undercommons," the concept brought by Fred Moten and Stefano Harney.9 They warn us against the institutionalized commons with

<sup>9</sup> Stefano Harney and Fred Moten, The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning & Black Study, Minor Compositions, 2013.

its potential to be trapped into a logic of (bureaucratic) management and control and correctness by policy, which contains the logics of an enclosure and induces it. Instead, the "under-commons" happens in the study, as they describe, of prophetic being together against oppression and in constant collective planning, their mending, and change (fugitive!) and the accompanying joy. "Study" is closer to collective cleaning, than learning a new skill or knowledge at a job training center or doing Ph.D. research, and closer to occasions of passion driven and self-organized gathering for "revolution." It is "not where everybody dissolves into the student, but where people sort of take turns doing things for each other or others, and where you allow yourself to be possessed by others as they do something."10 According to them, it is the commons but these commons are only possible beneath of institution – hence "undercommons." Then, one could ask here, how could you institute the (under)commons? Could art institutions, unlike any other institution, allow study to happen? Again, what do the commons look like? Could they ever be visible?

6.

Many of the institutions within the Arts Collaboratory network, notably including the Casco Art Institute, reduced the number of production and exhibitions they used to do over the last few years: instead, they invested time in understanding their modus operandi and their possible ecosystem towards more communal, more politically effective approach with and through art and artists. Many diagrams were drawn in this process, overlapping one circle to another and filling them with messy connections. Gradually and recently, a new structure of the program, a new form of organization, and new relations have been created as a result, many of which prioritizing "study," be it with the public or within the organization (concretely speaking many schools and learning programs were conceived). They may not be totally new as they are born within the negotiating space with the existing institution of power (that judge and value or undervalue art and the commons). Furthermore, the space of the commons never remains stable with a clear boundary. Yet what I am nearly convinced

is that this vulnerability would be the force for forms of solidarity for widening the commons. The vulnerability as accompanied by the invincible desire for study or, reproductive commons, undercommons, undercommons – say it! – as the values of life, would be in fact the needle to stitch fragmented territories, respective art institutions. What eventually would come out is not determined. Any image or shape is still undergoing the examination and concept proofing. What's certain is here art would be omnipresent and come in all the variety of the forms, but they won't be as visible they used to be – not simply in the institutional exhibitions but rather in all the possible outsides where the commons would inhabit anew. The paths we take now are to materialize this form of solidarity act and prove the power of art as the "look" of the commons.