A commonist aesthetics

Etienne Balibar has argued that every crisis calls forth its own critique (2016). The discourse of commons is gaining credibility as a critique appropriate to the crisis of hypercapitalism; its appeal stems partly from the real possibility that it presents to develop alternatives to the social relations of capitalism, in the moment. Commons is also coalescing as a site of material and conceptual struggle, involving a 'simultaneity . . . of knowledge-making and world-making' which Mei Zhan encapsulates in the term 'worlding' (Zhan, 2010). Responding to a question posed by Michel Bauwens about the form that a vibrant cultural expression of commons might take (2015), I am going to propose one approach to the worlding project of commons, namely the articulation and actualisation of a commonist aesthetics (Choi et al, 2015). I will argue that the role aesthetics plays in shifting perception, at an individual and communal level, is vital for an emerging political self-consciousness of the commons. I will examine the terms, ideas and stakes inherent in the approach that I am proposing and consider its implications and possibilities.

The term commons is used very broadly, and while attempts to fix the meaning of the term run contrary to principles of emergence and co-creation that underpin its worlding possibilities, some theorisation is needed to prevent the term from becoming conceptually flabby. I proposed at the outset that commons can be understood as a form of critique; I was drawing on two definitions of that term. For Balibar, critique is a means by which to 'produce the instruments, the elements of intelligibility, which . . . allow for an analysis and resolution'. The Catalan philosopher Marina Garcés articulates critique as an embodied 'discourse that has practical and liberatory effects on what we can see, what we can be, and what we can do' (2008). Commoning, as a practice, is an embodied, performative production of instruments of intelligibility, which remakes the practitioner at the same time that it makes a different kind of world, an opportunity to move beyond what the legal scholar of the commons Ugo Mattei calls 'the reductionist opposition of "subject-object," which produces the commodification of both' (2013).

As material commons were eradicated by capital, so the logic of commons, the sense of commons, largely disappeared from collective consciousness in the over-developed world. Common sense was colonised by capital; 'people, place, space and culture' were encaptured 'within the commodifying and alienating logic of capital accumulation', which is how Stuart Hodkinson describes capitalist subjectification, one of three acts of enclosure that he identifies along with displacement and

privatisation (Hodkinson, 2012: 509). Those of us who would engage in the kind of immanent, embodied critique that Garcés' proposes would have to begin by searching for contradictions and challenging orthodoxies within our colonised selves, a step towards the necessary rehabilitation of common sense that Mattei advocates, which is necessary to move towards a less alienating and more meaningful production of social relations (2013).

The worlding project of commons, as I stated at the outset, has world-making and knowledge-making aspects; both have an aesthetic foundation. Aesthetics is many things, as I will argue here. At its most fundamental, aesthetics is a capacity, a mode of apprehending which is both receptive and productive. It arises from the immediacy of an individual's sensuous relationship to the world, but also involves the recognition of a coherent relationship between the particular and the general, without reference to concepts or categories. Barbara Carper captured this very precisely in her study of the role of aesthetic knowledge in nursing practice. The aesthetic sense as described by Carper involves a capacity to abstract from particulars which 'resist projection into the discursive form of language' (Langer, 1957: 23 quoted in Carper, 1978: 16). It is not the individual elements in themselves which are significant, but their relationship in space and time. Following John Dewey (1980), Carper argues that to know in the (a)esthetic sense involves actively gathering together 'details and scattered particulars into an experienced whole for the purpose of seeing what is there' (1978: 26). A nursing action could be considered (a)esthetic where it involves 'the active transformation of an immediate object – [in this case] the patient's behaviour – into a direct, non-mediated perception of what is significant in it' (1978: 26). As a capacity to attend to what cannot be subsumed under categories or concepts, aesthetics feeds the imagination, the faculty which Immanuel Kant identified as linking sensuousness and understanding (Bowie, 2003: 16 - 48). Being both receptive and productive, aesthetics is a process by which sensible intuitions are made available for cognitive synthesis and by which concepts may be rendered sensuous (ibid).

Kant's contemporary, Friedrich von Schiller, recognised in this mode of knowledge production a means for bringing feeling and reason into alignment, educating and modulating the psyche of the newly emerging bourgeois subject (1794). For theory to become ideology, Terry Eagleton contends, it must first pass through the sensuous life of the body, which is why modern aesthetics initially had less to do with art and more to do with 'manners' and the coercive hegemony of taste (Eagleton, 1992). The need to formulate a new political unconscious for the emerging ruling class was one of the driving forces in the development of Enlightenment Aesthetics, according to Eagleton. For an ideology to take hold he says, 'structures of power must become structures of feeling' (ibid: 21); the role of aesthetics

in rendering concepts sensuous makes it an ideal tool for manipulation of the political unconscious. However, aesthetics is also a tool of intelligibility. Aesthetic acts explore and invent new ways of making sense of what is given to us as common sense, to paraphrase Jacques Rancière (2005: 139); unanticipated forms of visibility are produced in the process. To create a rupture between what we sense and how we make sense of it is an effect of aesthetics at its most critical. This is what Rancière terms 'dissensus' (2010), and it is at the heart of his theory of the politics of aesthetics.

Up to this point I have largely omitted 'art' from my analysis in order to focus on aesthetics as a dynamic. I have spoken about aesthetics in a number of ways: as a capacity to attend to what resists conceptualisation; as a form of knowing and a form of knowledge production; as an educational project to bring feeling and reason into alignment; as a way of modulating the psyche; as an instrument in shaping the political unconscious; as a means of translating structures of power into structures of feeling; as a tool of subjectification and a tool of intelligibility; as a means of inventing new forms of sense-making; as a means of rupturing the regime of visibility that determines what can be envisaged. Modern aesthetics is animated by these contradictory properties, and in the post-Enlightenment period these same contradictions reinvigorated the social institution of art, situating it in an indeterminate condition between art and life; not-merely-art and not-quite-life, as Rancière puts it. In his account art becomes 'a form of framing of common space and a mode of visibility' (2010: 138), not unlike Hannah Arendt's analysis of the social institution of public as a space of appearance, a common framework of interaction that makes possible the disclosure of a shared world (1958).

In the early 19th C the public sphere was expected to perform as a kind of circuit for reasoned debate. This idealised form was soon exploited as an apparatus to legitimate particular interests, negating what it excluded as Negt and Kluge have argued (1993). In spite of forces of enclosure acting upon it however, the public sphere retains its potency as 'a social space created by the reflexive circulation of discourse' (Warner, 2001). When the fragmented and invisibilised residues of the dominant public sphere aggregate or reorganise around a matter of common interest, the public sphere is temporarily reclaimed as a shared resource, as a commons. What had been incoherent may take shape as the source of a new public language. This is the point at which art and public, in their poetic and political aspects, are most closely related; the possibility of making and disclosing worlds-in-common.

There is one aspect of aesthetics that I have not yet discussed and that is aestheticization. When power of any kind appeals to '. . . the body's spontaneous impulses, [and becomes] entwined with sensibility and the affections' in ways that inhibit reflection, that power has become aestheticized in Eagleton's terms (Eagleton, 1990: 20). Hito Steyerl echoes this idea when she describes the current

era as one in which 'power operates . . . within the senses' (Steyerl, 2007). This 'Empire of the Senses' as she calls it is -

> built on shock and attraction, on desire and disgust, on hatred and hysteria, on feeling and fear. The power to trigger, channel, mediate and market those emotions is a characteristic of contemporary power as such (ibid).

Politics, Steyerl argues, is not only aestheticized but is 'exercised as aesthetics' (ibid). Violence, sex and a state of emergency are fused to produce an atmosphere of heightened alert, conflating glamour, titillation and fear in what she calls a 'pornography' (ibid) that acts on the nervous system of populations.

Aesthetic practitioners who work with social relations as a site and to some extent as a medium of their work, myself included, harness the sensibility and the affectivity of those with whom we work. In what is often termed socially engaged art, social relations are exercised as aesthetics, (here, I am using the term in a technical sense to refer to a set of operations that involves arranging, juxtaposing and framing elements for circulation in an economy of pleasure and taste). While the relations within a socially engaged art work may appear to be ethical and correct in a political sense, the aesthetic within which they are framed is always already legitimated by the same hegemonic forces that reproduce social inequality, so they are always aestheticized to some degree. What is contested is whether such an aestheticization negates the capacity of the work to rupture the regime of visibility within which it is legitimated; or to invent forms of sense-making that challenge the very distribution of power which makes the work possible; or to deconstruct the lexicon by which the work achieves its coherence. This is one of the key problems that I am testing and grappling with in my own practice-based research

[This graph](#) is something that I have been constructing since the beginning of my PhD. It is an ongoing record of the social infrastructure taking shape through and around my research. All of the actors, institutions, physical spaces and events that have been involved in or interacted with my practice-based research are represented by a node and by lines of relation. Nodes expand in size as the number of their relations multiply, so the extent to which my research is co-produced with others is here made explicit and visible. Each of the actors in this diagram is someone who has responded to invitations or attended events that I have staged, or people who are contributing significantly to my practice in other ways. The form that is taking shape here is not a community so much as a social space organised around a matter of common interest. At this point that social space is quite homogenous in terms of class and status; I am working to expand beyond that bubble of privilege.

I have been lucky to work at different times with architects, designers, urban planners, hackers and cultural geographers who are very much engaged in their work with questions of social justice. I have observed how they operate across different economies of value; use value, symbolic value, exchange value, time value and so on. They move fluidly between these demarcated spheres to generate tools and instruments to shape new common languages, but they also work as the need arises with art's modes of visibility, to explore slippages and folds in the production of meaning. I see a vibrant cultural expression of commons already emerging through those practices, and my proposal for a commonist aesthetics draws on what I have observed. A commonist aesthetics is intended to operate as a structuring principle and a productive interface between the theoretical-discursive aspects of commons on the one hand and the embodied sensorium of commoning on the other. The 'prosthetic space of art', to use Garoian's term (2013), will operate within that structure rather than the other way around. A performative, collective, embodied process of common sense-making, employing systems of art, design, publicness, economy etc., in a poetic and political effort to reconfigure what Garcés articulates as 'the "we" and the world that is amongst us' (2008); this is the route by which I am attempting to contribute to the worlding project of commons.

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