

[Ανακοίνωση και αναμένεται δημοσίευση από το

ISEA 2011, International Symposium of Electronic Arts, Sabanci University, 14 – 21

Σεπτεμβρίου 2011, Κωνσταντινούπολη

διαθέσιμο στο διαδίκτυο στη διεύθυνση

<http://isea2011.sabanciuniv.edu/paper/artists-new-producers-common>

Artists as the new producers of the common (?)

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Short abstract:

This paper examines a new form of creativity, based on the commons. Using as case studies two projects organised by the National Museum of Contemporary Art of Athens in 2010, it aims to define the features of this emerging creativity and to locate the challenges and changes formed for the creators involved in this process.

Paolo Virno writes that post-fordism is the era of the ‘communism of the capital.’ [1] The notion, which may be heard as a political (pseudo) paradox of our times describing a capital based on communalism, is not a new form of utopia however; it rather implies a new kind of accumulation and creation of value based on the expropriation of the common. Knowledge, information, affects, codes, social relations, the new ‘artificial’ common wealth, which is not inherited but is produced and shared by the ‘posse’ - the potentiality - of the contemporary multitude, is what is at stake and what is being capitalised today according to the Italian school of thought. Produced in the contemporary metropoleis as well as in the networked spaces we have come to inhabit, the common is multitude’s strength and its Achillees’ heel at the same time. Continuously becoming and constantly expropriated, being abundant, dynamic and diffused, it can only be understood as a derivative of a life in excess and a life open to appropriation and control. The ‘communism of the capital’ therefore is an oxymoron expressing the controversies and questionings of the postfordist condition. How can multitude’s capacities to think, to produce and exchange information and knowledge escape capitalization? How can they be reclaimed and by whom? If there is no longer an outside, as it is often being said, is there maybe a possibility for a change, which would derive from within?

This paper looks into the role of art in the years of the new common wealth. Taking into consideration the great number of projects which have been developed in the last decade as well as the references made to creativity in the context of the new discussion on the commons, a double sided observation is attempted: not only on how forms of art encourage a swift of mentality towards the commons, but also on how the art world itself changes through this process.

The starting point for this positioning will be two projects initiated and curated by myself and organized by the National Museum of Contemporary Art of Athens in 2010, the year when Greece started losing its financial independence. Seeking for alternatives in the impasse of late capitalism, ‘Esse, Nosse, Posse: Common Wealth for Common People’ and ‘Mapping the Commons, Athens’ aimed to examine and locate the commons in their two main reservoirs, the internet and the city.

Esse, Nosse, Posse: Common Wealth for Common People

‘Esse, Nosse, Posse: Common Wealth for Common People’ is an online platform which was launched in April 2010, as an open comment to the growing common wealth of the connected society [2]. The title is a reference to the latin triad “I am, I know, I can”, that having constituted the core of renaissance’s humanism, today interestingly reappears in order to describe the features of the contemporary multitude [3]; what is important is not only the knowledge itself but also our potentiality for its production and the formation of our subjectivities through it at the same time. Taking this into consideration, the online platform aimed to refer -through a rich variety of artistic creation-, to the motivations and capacities that form the new common wealth and to respectively discuss the controversies and risks lying behind it. To achieve this, “Esse, Nosse, Posse: Common Wealth for Common People” hosted: (a.) projects critically commenting on the new forms of networked wealth and (b.) initiatives and open platforms based on free and open software, encouraging exchange and collaboration. Selected texts were also uploaded as resources to provide a context for further discussion.

The issues tackled by the projects that were presented were the following: the passage from the fordist to the post fordist society and the transformation of labor ('First of May' by Marcelo Exposito), the immeasurability of the immaterial work conducted in the networks ('User Labor' by Burak Arikān & Engin Erdogan), the new forms of online labour based on virtual sweatshops ('Invisible Threads' by Jeff Crouse & Stephanie Rothenberg, 'Gold Farmers' by Ge Jin aka Jingle) or on crowdsourcing ('Bicycle Built for 2,000' by Aaron Koblin & Daniel Massey, 're_potemkin' by .-_.), the call for a free exchange of knowledge beyond copyrights ('Free Culture Game' by Molleindustria, 'Perpetual Wall' by Dimitris Papadatos), the interweaved character of the networked economy ('All over' by Samuel Bianchini), the imbalance of the information society ('Internet art for poor people' by Carlos Katastrofsky and

'MAICgregator' by Nicholas Knouf), and the value of attention economy in territories of info-noise ('Falling Times' by Michael Bielicky & Kamila B. Richter).

While the above works were discussing the capitalist character of the networked condition, the platforms, that were also introduced, invited the users to join efforts of collaboration, co-production and knowledge sharing. Initiatives by collectives with significant work in the field were listed such as: the Furtherfield who encourage people to recycle their old laptops by offering them to the homeless (the 'Zero Dollar Laptop'), the Platoniq who propose a platform of exchanging services (the 'Bank of Common Knowledge') or the Mediashed who propose people to communicate their low cost products through their database ('Gearbox'). Escaping capitalization, control and appropriation, these efforts propose to users a different mode of engagement and production in the networks. At the same time, projects with a more specific character were also included. Such were the platform of Anders Weberg ('P2P art') who invites people to participate in the creation of an ephemeral common artwork based on a peer to peer logic or Brett Gaylor's 'Open Source cinema' who invites users to upload and remix the videos online. The Artzilla team has also been included for its web browsers' modifications and subversions that support freedom and openness, along with the Shiftspace group who, in a similar approach, propose the placement of open source layers above any website. Additionally, the network Kate Rich created for the fair trade of products is presented ('Feral Trade') as well as Dmitri Kleiner's 'Telecommunisten' network which offers tools and services that are owned by the workers themselves.

A new utopia or a breakthrough in the networked world? This entity of projects is only part of an emerging creativity on the web which is based on the idea of the commons. But, can we realize our potential and re-orientate our disposal for socialization and knowledge towards the new liberated environments the artists propose? While we might be in the beginning of a shift in mentality, yet it should be noted that the initiatives and actions discussed in the context of this paper are not being valued on the basis of their popularity or 'efficiency.' They are considered noteworthy for the stance that their creators take. What lies behind them is a call, an urge for a new system of values which can empower the growing common wealth. And these values are to be found not solely within the web, but also within life itself and especially in its most lively terrain, which is the contemporary metropolis.

Mapping the Commons, Athens

'Mapping the Commons, Athens' was a cartography project that followed 'Esse, Nosse, Posse' reflecting a need to trace the commons in the urban environment and to examine their role in times of crisis. The project took the form of a cartography workshop conceptualized by the Spanish collective Hackitectura which was commissioned by and hosted in the premises of the National Museum of Contemporary Art, Athens in December 2010 [4]. The aim was clear: to map the city of Athens, restless and vulnerable as it was, according to its

commons. The work was undertaken by an interdisciplinary group of artists and researchers from universities of Athens, guided and supervised by Hackitectura, with the contribution of artists, sociologists, scientists and theorists working on the field.

Seeing beyond the 'public' and the 'private', the team sought for, examined and documented the different types of commons that were located in the urban environment. The elements of sociability, openness, sharing and accessibility were of primary importance during this exploration, and special attention was given to peer to peer practices, community networks and forms of exchange economy. The entries enriching the cartography were decided and organized according to certain parameters related to the 'wealth' being produced, the community supporting it and the risks of its enclosure and exploitation.

The team successfully produced two maps: a research map, where all commons were described, categorized and located, and a video map where certain commons were developed into video case studies by the participants. Furthermore, a blog documenting the progress of the workshop was also created while the most important outcome of the project was the 'common' produced during the workshop itself. And this was the knowledge that the community of creators, students, artists and theorists formed together while also building a common experience and imaginary.

Locating the features of common-based art

Taking the works referred above as examples, one can interestingly locate similarities that assist in recognizing the features of a new form of creativity which emerges on the basis of the common. The rich variety of works discussed although they might be categorized as net art, game art, software art or as documentaries, interventions, databases and maps, at the same time they all share a kind of openness and collectiveness which opposes previous ways of perception and evaluation in the contemporary art or new media art scene.

In an attempt to locate and summarize some of the main features of this creativity , the following points could be used as a start:

- The works, in their wide variety, do not constitute art objects or art installations; they present no certain aura and claim no art market value.
- They accordingly do not aim for the awe of the spectator; they do not impress by their aesthetics, technics or complexity.
- They claim no authorship and no uniqueness; their power is in their distribution and diffusion.
- They are not cryptic or ironic; on the contrary, they aim to be direct, understandable and reachable.

- They address the citizens and users of the cities and the networks and not specifically the art audience, the art institutions or the art collectors;

The aim of this growing entity of works seems to be no other than to socialize knowledge. They are works that as Matteo Pasquinelli expressed it, belong to the age of ‘social reproducibility,’ [\[5\]](#) which followed Benjamin’s age of ‘mechanical reproduction.’ We have gone beyond the unlimited reproduction of artistic objects and the loss of the aura of the prototype. The challenge for the works of art is a new one; it is the challenge for a ‘unicity without aura’ as Virno put it, for a ‘non-original unicity which originates in the anonymous and impersonal character of the technical reproduction’. Art’s new aim, he argues, is to find the relation between the highest possible degree of communality or generality and the highest possible degree of singularity, the balance between the most general and the most particular [\[6\]](#). Aren’t the works previously mentioned a first step towards this direction as they refer to the common wealth produced by the general intellect on one hand and to the importance of the contribution of each singularity on the other? Isn’t the presence of the artist’s identity lessened as works seek for a new balance between individuality and collectivity? Or rather between “multiplicity of individual expression and the unity of a collective will,” between “singularity and solidarity, cooperation and freedom?” [\[7\]](#)

This realisation however leads to the need for the second definition: who are the creators that seek this new balance expressed as a ‘unicity without aura’ for their works and why?

Describing the creators of commons based art / the new commoners

Discussing works based on collectivity, openness and lack of authorship, it easily becomes clear that we mostly refer to creators who are leaving the role of the ‘artist’ and move towards the one of the initiator, the collaborator, the affective worker, the networked creator, the hacktivist. Often, the creators might not even be artists. In their shoes there are programmers, architects, lawyers, social scientists, or generally people from different fields who see creativity as an invaluable tool of expression, communication and resistance. This is a new generation of creators who wishes to merge with the ‘audience’, blurring prior boundaries and hierarchies. What brings them together is the virtuosity, the social competences and the affective potentialities they all have and use in their virtual and urban interactions. For Virno, who assigns to virtuosity a central role for the postfordist way of being, and sees creativity as diffused today, “each and every individual is, *at the same time*, the artist performing the action and the audience: he performs individually while he assists the other’s performances.” [\[8\]](#)

But what does such a realization mean? Do artists still have a role to play or they fade in the name of a new common and radical approach of creativity?

At this point, one needs to pause and reflect on some of the fundamental ideas of the common wealth on one hand and on the actions of the creators being discussed on the other. "There is no commons without commoning" Peter Linebaugh wrote, highlighting the fact that besides the common goods, the social practices of a community are also needed. There is no commons without the commoners; these are the individuals that not only produce and share the commons but also establish relationships of solidarity between them and fight to reclaim the commons that have been enclosed. While Linebaugh refers to the 'Magna Carta', the commoners of the medieval England and the land enclosures, one could interestingly juxtapose this sequence to the inhabitants of today's cities and networks with the enclosure of the common wealth produced. What seems to be missing however is the cultural memory of a prior different mode of being and sharing that the commoners of land had, reminding them what there was to be reclaimed [9]. Missing this element, an urge for a common imaginary appears that - replacing common memory - will be based on the realization of the multitude's potentialities and will offer the ground to step on in order to reclaim the surplus of the knowledge and information which is being enclosed today. A form of this common imaginary is what the creators are building through their initiatives, activating through it the shaping of new communities and new commons. Seeing artists as the new commoners therefore is the first point that can be made regarding their contribution.

A second point can become clear while looking into the formation of the new common spaces that the artists are particularly proposing which are beyond control and exploitation. The online collaborative platforms, the databases of exchange or the workshops organised can be seen as the new interconnected spaces that allow communities of commoners to be formed, offering to the worrying and restless multitude a new home and a new ground for social encounters.

Thirdly, the creators today may assist the contemporary digital multitude by encouraging the use of the tools that we all already have in our possession. What we need today is to learn how to work with language, codes, ideas and affects, how to build relationships through them [10]. We need the knowledge and information infrastructure that artistic creation seems to be able to provide while avoiding at the same time the appropriation of these tools on the web and in the city environment by third parties.

Finally and hopefully, through such a process a new system and a new theory of value can emerge, one which would express the desire of the multitude for a liberated connectivity. As life is in excess today, as work and life have become one, a new balance can only be found through creativity that embraces the ideas of sharing and co-producing.

Reclaiming a new form of exodus

Open, participatory and rhizomatic, the new form of art emerging based on the commons seems to have some of the features that media art had not reach before. It is a form of art that tries to assist, to engage with the audience and to share knowledge. It informs and encourages transformation; it takes responsibility and helps the multitude to overcome its fears.

Although this new form of creation could be related to certain movements of the art history such as the Dada, for its recycling practices and its negation towards artist's authorship, to the Situationism for its refusal to copyrights, or to the movements of institutional critique, yet the creativity based on the commons presents an interesting differentiation. It is not necessarily anti – art or anti-institutional. It alternatively takes a stance or a point of view that looks beyond the art system and the art world. The artists don't negate art or the museums' structures and hierarchies. They often choose to address to them and propose new forms of collaboration that will need however to be based on new grounds of openness and sharing. They often invite institutions to enter a game based on openness and diffusion of information and to surpass the constraints of ownership and authorship that might have impeded such an orientation. They ask museums to join their efforts towards the commons by providing the audiences a context for art practices related to sharing, by encouraging and presenting creators' alternatives to capitalism, by assisting in the formation of new common places and common values beyond institutional walls.

Facing the impasse of late capitalism, the creators of the works that were discussed in this context, seem to ultimately aim for a new form of exodus. This exodus however can only come from within, by staying where we are and by expressing a collective will for a change. The idea therefore is to "pursue a line of flight while staying right here, by transforming the relations of production and mode of social organization under which we live." [11] For this reason, the efforts of the creators to reach out and communicate ideas, to overcome themselves as names and overcome art as art, assist in the formation of a multitude of commoners which can achieve direct experiences of cooperation beyond exploitation. This is a value that is worth noting and supporting for the years to come.



This research has been co-financed by the European Union (European Social Fund – ESF) and Greek national funds through the Operational Program "Education and Lifelong Learning" of the National Strategic Reference Framework (NSRF) - Research Funding Program: Heracleitus II. Investing in knowledge society through the European Social Fund.

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