CARING FOR THE COMMON AND CARING IN COMMON: TOWARDS AN EXPANDED ARCHITECTURE/DESIGN PRACTICE

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ABSTRACT

In this position paper, we will explore care as an integral part of a feminist autonomous-Marxist research tradition to co-create emancipatory spaces of 'dissensus' in urban neighbourhoods. We will critically reflect on our own design-research practice embodied through an ongoing neighbourhood project, Common(s)Lab: Nachbarschaftslabor in Berlin-Neukölln, where we collectively explore the commons through a threefold lens: care, space, and the economy. Constituting the common through care situates a different form of social reproduction in, against, and beyond capitalism - through practices of sharing, negotiating, learning, and making. In line with van de Sande, these relational practices constitute an 'outside' that exists 'inside' the dominant relations and structures it seeks to challenge. This presents the urgent task of designing spaces of dissensus to prefigure an ethics and practice of care, both in our everyday lives and professional practices.

INTRODUCTION

In times of a global crisis of care, the shortcomings of the neoliberal order have become increasingly tangible and urgent. Practices of commoning and sharing are emerging around the world to illuminate alternative visions of our current realities and possible futures. Within this context, this paper endeavours to position design/spatial practice against and beyond capitalist modes of production, towards an expanded and critical practice that is rooted in the commons. In doing so, we seek to challenge the relegation of the field to its dominant occupation with the functional and the aesthetic, or, more acutely, its complicity – and unquestioned dependency – in reproducing market logics and neoliberal urbanisation (Fezer 2010; Gruber 2015; Blundell Jones, Petrescu, Till 2005).

By employing a feminist methodology of embodied action-research, collective knowledge-making, and decentered power-relations, we acknowledge care as both a theoretical and practical framework. We will situate an 'indisciplinary' approach (Rancière 2008) of caring for the common and caring in common. Firstly, this implies caring for the social, ecological, political, and everyday implications of design/spatial practice in a relational manner; seeking to dismantle their divisions, amongst one another as well as other disciplines, through processes of collective knowledge-making and sharing. Secondly, we foreground caring in/for the common as an integral part of our methodology in the co-creation of everyday spaces of dissensus as infrastructures for agency. Here, we will reflect on our own design research practice embodied through an ongoing neighbourhood project in Berlin-Neukölln.

CARING FOR THE COMMON AND CARING IN COMMON AS PREFIGURATIVE POLITICS

So what exactly do we mean when by caring for the common and caring in common? Firstly, it acts as a provocation. But, secondly, it is a method, or, perhaps, better articulated as an 'instituting practice' (Tan 2014) - a process of 'becoming in common', through the imagination and enactment of frameworks and tools that are constantly subject to calibration. Caring for the common and caring in common is an ongoing process of both negotiation and sharing, always dependent on the subjectivities of the people involved, the commoners; the material/immaterial wealth to be shared, the common (De Angelis 2017, 18); and the spaces of dissensus (Rancière 2010), virtual or physical, in which these practices are (re)produced. In line with Ruivenkamp and Hilton, we "generally avoid the focus on commons as shared resources and rather perceive commons as the creation of new forms of sociality, as new collective practices of living, working, thinking, feeling and imagining that act against the contemporary capitalist forms of producing and consuming (variously enclosing) the common wealth" (2017, 7).

We have foregrounded care as fundamental to these practices and spaces of commoning for a number of reasons. Care can be understood in many different ways: as an emotion (caring about someone), as an activity (taking care of something), as a form of labour (paid or unpaid), and as a specific kind of ethics, as developed by feminists in the second half of the 20th century. But, care can be also understood in a broader sense when applied to practices that go beyond the walls of hospitals and private homes: "as a civic activity, which amongst other things, concerns looking after communities and building connections between people" (Trogal 2012, 2). In her PhD thesis 'Caring for Space', architect/researcher Kim Trogal points out how making ""who is caring for who?" central, we reveal hierarchies, dependencies and exclusions" (Ibid). And, critically, economist and historian Friederike Habermann differentiates between reproduction and care: the former is framed as the unpaid labour exploited by capitalism[1], and the latter through its inherent potential for an economy based on non-monetary relations (2016, 27). Drawing from, and expanding on, this notion of care, we situate it as an everyday practice

1As criticised, amongst others, by Marxist-feminists such as Silvia Federici and Mariarosa Dalla Costa, and others in the Wages for Housework movement of the 1970s.

and embedded methodology – or instituting practice – that is inseparable from commoning.

Inasmuch as this instituting practice places emphasis on care as an integral component in the everyday (re)production of practices and spaces of commoning; it also emerges as a mode to frame dissensus (Rancière 2010) by illuminating other ways of being, thinking, feeling and acting. It is an active and creative process of contesting the hegemonic order to reveal and prefigure new forms of sociality, new relationships to, and in, the collective worlds we inhabit. In this manner, collective forms of commoning emerge antagonistically to 'business as usual'; however, this is not contained in a negative form or a refusal, but rather embodies the prefigurative construction of other ways of being and doing. As Solnit suggests, 'prefigurative politics' "describes the idea that if you can embody the change you struggle for, you have already won – not by fighting but by becoming" (Solnit 2005; Holloway 2010).

SPACES OF DISSENSUS: CO-CREATING INFRASTRUCTURES FOR AGENCY

Spaces of dissensus, rooted in and framed by care, can act as catalysts for – and embryonic prefigurations of – heterogeneous, emancipatory, and egalitarian ways of being and doing in the city. As Harvey insists, referring to Henri Lefebvre, 'the right to the city' is the "right to change ourselves by changing the city" (2013, 4). In this provocation, we situate a performative agency which positions agency vis-à-vis the power structures and the normative social and economic relations that shape our everyday lives. Butler frames performativity as describing "both the processes of being acted on and the conditions and possibilities for acting" (2015, 63). Taking inspiration from Petrescu's notion of 'designing agency rather than objects' (2010, 89), we posit the collective co-creation of infrastructures for agency. We see these as an intervention in the processes of being acted on and the co-creation of conditions and possibilities for acting otherwise. Such infrastructures for agency are critical for, and inseparable from, participation in spaces of dissensus. When we speak of 'participation', we are taking a critical stance in relation to the term as it is commonly employed. Questioning its orientation towards consensus in democratic processes – both in design and in politics – we, instead, embrace dissensus as a mode that allows for confrontation, political struggle and relational subjectivation (also see Mouffe, 2005; Keshavarz & Mazé, 2013).

The world-wide crisis of democracy, the everyday regime of consumption and work, the erosion of the welfare state towards individual responsibility, and a market-driven economy are driving a different kind of 'civic engagement' in cities (Baier, Hansing, Müller & Werner 2016, 58). People are taking things into their own hands, collectively: in urban gardens, open workshops, fab labs, repair cafés, self-organised community spaces, neighbourhood academies, and much more. Within these contexts, people can engage in meaningful activities on a low-threshold basis. They can decide themselves how to 'participate' by contributing what and how they can, independent of their socio-economic status. The emancipatory potential to (un)learn and (un)make some of our normative behaviours, habits and ways of thinking, and gain confidence and skills as politically active subjects, is immense. In order to reflect these processes, the infrastructures themselves are not ossified, fixed, and unchanging structures – on the contrary, we view them as malleable and reflexive, always in movement or 'becoming'.

Taking inspiration from Gruber's argument that institutions of commoning, much like Federici's commoning with a small "c", are institutions with a small "i" (Baldauf et al. 2017, 98), we too see these infrastructures as verbs or processes, or an instituting practice. They form the continually adjusted frameworks and toolkits to ensure that the medium for performative agency, and the values of commoning, are translated into practice: the sharing of "power to" against the accumulation of "power over" (Holloway 2002); the negotiation of roles and protocols; and the concurrence and exceedance of differences (Harrison & Katrini, 2018).

SHARING, (UN)LEARNING AND (UN)MAKING – A CASE OF A NEIGHBOURHOOD LABORATORY
At the end of 2017, we co-founded Common(s)Lab as a neighbourhood laboratory in its perpetual becoming. It is located in Berlin-Neukölln where we both live, making us both researchers embedded in our own research context. Following a feminist perspective and Haraway's notion of situated knowledge (1988), we take on shifting positionalities as young female researchers, designer/architect, mother and neighbours, engaging in processes of change that might affect our own living environment and practice. Alongside this feminist perspective and situated knowledge, we also embrace, as aforementioned, an 'indisciplinary' approach that

seeks to dismantle the divisions of a disciplinary knowledge-making. As Rancière states:

> "*How does a question come to be considered philosophical or political or social or aesthetic? If emancipation had a meaning, it consisted in reclaiming thought as something belonging to everyone – the correlate being that there is no natural division between intellectual objects and that a discipline is always a provisional grouping, a provisional territorialisation of questions and objects that do not in and of themselves possess any specific localisation or domain.*" (2007)

Common(s)Lab is nested within a larger community structure called TOP, a project space shared amongst a group of around 20 people with various cultural and scientific backgrounds[2]. The sharing of resources such as equipment, rent, and infrastructure – event and co-working space, wood workshop, bio-lab, kitchen, community – constitutes a mutual support system which has enabled us to commence immediately without reliance on any further funding. Furthermore, the cross-pollination of immaterial knowledge and skills has been invaluable in cultivating such an 'indisciplinarity'. The main topic of our research is embodied through this daily practice of commoning, sharing, and negotiation at the space.

We have approached our shared main focus, exploring the common and commoning, through a threefold lens: care, space and the economy. By responding to local needs and observations (e.g. the opportunity to transform the bulky waste on the streets into useful items through repair and building skills, or the provision of gift boxes around the neighbourhood), we started to create an experimental curriculum both hands-on and theoretical. This has allowed us to grow different communities of practice, interest, and place without employing a rigid strategy for participation, first learning from the social dynamics taking place. To avoid hierarchies and foster a sense of shared ownership and 'caring in common', we welcome participants to help with everyday reproductive tasks such as setting up, packing down, washing dishes, sweeping floors; and also contribute their own suggestions and co-organising events with us. Our identities as practitioners and researchers are only secondary – first and foremost, we are neighbours, activists, and co-organisers.

2 For more info, please check: www.top-ev.de and www.commonslab.de.

Once a format has proved valuable to those taking part, it has recurred regularly with improvement by the ideas and input from its participants. These formats include 1) DIT (Do-It-Together) building workshops, utilising bulky waste collected from the neighbourhood, and supported by a carpenter/designer from the TOP community; 2) a bi-annual gift/swap market, where people can exchange unwanted clothes and such amongst each other without using money; 3) monthly political documentary screenings for caretakers of babies; 4) various reading groups that build local learning communities outside the walls of academia; and 5) a range of mutual skill/knowledge exchange workshops (see Img. 1-4).

Img. 1: DIY Woodworking with bulky waste from the streets (Moebus 2018)

Img. 2: Group of participants with their creations (Moebus 2018)

Img. 3: Baby DOC screening with parents and babies (Moebus 2018)

Img. 4: Street view during a gift market (Moebus 2018)

As different as these formats are, they all have one thing in common: the practice of sharing, both material and immaterial, on a mutual basis of care; both for human and non-human others, eschewing the market logics that prevail outside of the space. They have enabled people, including ourselves, to participate in meaningful activities that grow existing knowledges, subjectivities, and political agency within a "common symbolic space" that can facilitate confrontation (Mouffe, 2005) and dissensus (Rancière, 2010), showing that there are alternatives to the existing order.

> "*To intervene in the dominant order that structures our lives, we have to allow for ways that challenge systems of oppression that enable different knowledge, experiences, and agendas to enter our perceptions and our multiple world-makings. We have to cross because "no one comes to consciousness alone, in isolation, only for herself, or passively." (Hille in Baldauf et al. 2017, 80)*

In terms of our economic structure, Common(s)Lab has been largely autonomous but deeply interconnected; nested within the larger TOP community but moving beyond boundaries to become a micro-'community economy'. Costs are reduced as far as possible during activities – for example, by using waste wood off the streets in the building workshops – and are additionally self-funded through participants solidarity-donations and small funds coming from carefully examined alliances with local cultural initiatives. Inspired by feminist geographers J.K. Gibson-Graham, we understand the economy as a diverse whole, comprising all the hidden relational activities that mostly take place, unpaid, at home and on the streets of our

neighbourhoods, where capital and paid labour are just a tiny part on the tip of the iceberg (2006a; see Fig. 1).

Fig. 1: The ice-berg image drawn by Ken Byrne.[3]

> "*Representing the diverse economy is a deconstructive process that displaces the binary hierarchies of market/non-market and capitalism/non-capitalism, turning singular generalities into multiple particularities, and yielding a radically heterogeneous economic landscape (...). As a practice of development, constructing a community economy is an ethical project of acknowledging relationships and making connections, rather than a technical project of activating generic logics of growth.*" (Gibson-Graham, 2006b, xiv)

Through this, care becomes the ethical foundation of our economic structure, reflecting values of solidarity and mutuality both materially and immaterially. Gibson-Graham furthermore point out that most people don't recognise themselves as significant actors and shapers of the economy (2013) - as soon as we start seeing

ourselves as "economic actors with multiple roles" (Ibid), we can begin to redesign, shape, and 'take back' our economies little by little. For us, Common(s)Lab provides an experimental field to materialise and test other economic practices - "a field in which we have the power to intervene and that we can mould by making new economies in the here and now (...) to resist absolute dependence on wage labour and subordination to precarising capitalist relations", as design duo *Brave New Alps* points out in their research on socio-politically engaged (design) practices (2016, 8-9).

EXPANDING DESIGN/ARCHITECTURE THROUGH AN INDISCIPLINARY APPROACH OF CARE

Through this 'indisciplinary' approach to caring for the common and caring in common, we point to an expanded practice of design/architecture that demonstrates concern for the socio-political and economic processes of spatial production and the agencies/subjectivations that arise in spaces of dissensus inasmuch as, if not more than, the functional or aesthetic qualities of our built environments. We do not attempt to establish another -ism, field, preposition or category within design and spatial practice but, rather, we call for a different mindset that is oriented with an ethics of care, informing the way we practice our everyday lives, both private and professional. In this manner, we eschew sub-categorisation or marginal alternatives, instead positing the wholly transformative reimagining of what design could and should be, do, and address. This endeavour exceeds disciplinary borders, and requires a dialogue amongst academic disciplines, professional practices, and everyday people to collectively reshape the way we can re-imagine and act upon our realities.

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3 Featured on the website of the Community Economies Collective and the Community Economies Research Network. Source: http://www.communityeconomies.org/Home/Key-Ideas [Accessed: 02 June 2017]

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