
COMMENTARY

Aesthetics, Commons and the Production of the Subject: An Interview with Cornelia Sollfrank and Felix Stalder

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Two of the editors of the volume *Aesthetics of the Commons* (Diaphanes 2021) Cornelia Sollfrank and Felix Stalder discuss with WPCC journal the potential and meanings of the digital commons in creating new subjectivities and new imaginaries on and off the internet. Within this they question whether the focus on the aesthetics of the commons is useful for understanding phenomena such as ‘artistic shadow libraries’, pointing towards the need to build institutions for which ‘practices of commoning are central’. Also considered are the modern art system, copyright, and the corrosive individualism of Western modernity in the artistic sphere. Against these factors they note instead that, ‘the commons are structured through different relations, and care expresses that difference’. New economic approaches are needed in the arts supported by political actors which might include the ‘re-envisioning [of] public institutions, such as public broadcasting, as part of a commons’.

Keywords: commons; aesthetics; copyright; platform capitalism; shadow libraries; care; art system; decolonisation

WPCC: Thanks for agreeing to participate in an interview with WPCC. We’d like to start with a large question. You have both been working in practical and theoretical level with the ideas and practice surrounding aesthetic commons and digital commons notably through the research project *Creating Commons* (n.d.). Could you maybe both reflect on some of the more inspirational examples of work for each of you from within the project? And also highlight any other projects outside that research project that could be seen in some way as ‘aesthetic commons’ ventures that you think might potentially galvanise other initiatives, artworks or projects?

CS: I am not sure, if I find the term ‘aesthetic commons’ useful. The connection we are making in our research is between commons as a form of organizing resources, and aesthetics as a correlation of the subjects and the dynamics in which they are embedded. Aesthetics is central to the processes of subjectivation and to the production of the subject. In this sense, one could say that our interest lies in the exploration of how alternative ways of managing resources produce new subjectivities and vice versa. And we are doing this in the field of art

with its specific conditions for producing specific realities. But aesthetics per se are not limited to the field of art. Also Facebook offers an aesthetics in this sense.

Regarding concrete projects, I would like to introduce the artistic shadow libraries. These are platforms that provide access to digital resources online. In terms of form of organisation, size or thematic orientation they are all different, but what they have in common is that it is small groups of artists who run these projects, they provide the technical infrastructure as well as the contents, they have not been commissioned by any institution to do this work – and they run the projects on zero budget, which is all the more surprising when you see the size and the impact they have. For example UbuWeb provides a vast archive of material related to the avant-garde of the 20th century including audio- and video material one cannot find elsewhere.¹ The exciting thing about these projects is that they can only exist because they take the liberty of ignoring copyright. No museum in the world, no public library would be able to build a similar collection. Far from being the solution to social tensions, they rather are the embodiments of such contemporary contradictions.

FS: Another group of projects we focused on have been building institutions for which practices of commoning are central. One example is the work Laurence Rassel is doing as director of the *École de Recherche Graphique*,² one of the public art schools in Brussels. There, she is reorganizing the institution around practices of collaboration, care and shared decision-making. This includes small acts, such as changing the schedules of the cleaning staff from night-time to daytime to make this work visible, to large acts such as opening-up the decision-making processes and changing the physical layout of the building. The point here, and in all other institutional projects we have explored, is not to create an experimental utopia, but to build a different environment in the real, one that is, as Rassel puts it, 'less toxic'.³

WPCC: Platform capitalism (Srnicek 2017) seems particularly challenging a framework for artists and other cultural workers to make a living from or thrive emotionally within. In the face of many challenges do you see any or many forms of platform cooperativism succeeding in the arts at all?

FS: The modern art system has always been bound, structurally, to the notions of the individual creator and private property. This has not only discouraged cooperation but also created lots of problems within existing processes of cooperation, because certain people receive more attention than others, creating, over time, hierarchies amongst collaborators. This is part of the reason why so few collective projects in the field of art have been sustainable. But the art system is complex and all kinds of counter-tendencies do exist in parallel. There has been a long tradition of 'artist-run' institutions, for example, many of which have understood themselves as operating according to a different logic. Some of them, such as Furtherfield⁴ in London, are drawing heavily on the notion of the commons and adapting D.I.Y to D.I.W.O: instead of do-it-yourself, do-it-with-others. Most of the projects we looked at, could be called 'artist-run' institutions, operating both online and offline, precisely because they understand that they need to develop their own institutional forms in order to implement different social (and property) relations.

On the other end of the scale, an interesting experiment is going on right now with the curatorship of documenta XV,⁵ one of the most high-profile positions in the art world. It was given to the Indonesian collective *ruangrupa*, which draws heavily on the notion of the *lumbung*, which they describe as 'a collectively governed rice-barn, where the gathered harvest is stored for the common good of the community'.⁶ In their practice, they try to connect people and projects into a shared space, rather than exhibit individual positions. Whether they will be able to resolve the basic contradiction between their interests and the structure of the system remains to be seen.

CS: I think, it will be interesting to see what is going to happen when such different 'economies' as high-profile art world and self-organisation come together. Usually, the art world is able to neutralise all efforts that are not market-compatible. Simply, the fact that the curatorial process will have to be determined along the requirements of an international art exhibition and its top-down selection process will limit the spirit of collectivity and bottom-up practice ... not to speak of the consequences of inclusion and exclusion with regards to such a high-profile event.

Regarding the platform cooperativism, I would like to add that it is a matter of size. Of course, there are many examples of cooperation and the different logic that comes with it in the art world, but the art world at large has no interest in large scale social change. On the contrary, it is a liberal construct whose purpose always has been to foster and celebrate individual freedom of the bourgeois subject and thus provide the basis for capitalist exploitation.

WPCC: In similar contexts we've seen many refer to the African idea of *ubuntu* as a helpful way of framing non-individualistic cultural and economic relations. Just to interject, do either of you find that a useful term, theoretically or practically?

CS: There seems to be a general tendency in free culture to romanticise indigenous cultures and their pre-capitalist ways of living. I have nothing against such references as long as the people who use them make the effort to transfer the core ideas to our industrial societies. By pretending we are elsewhere, we cannot change the here and now.

FS: I think two things come together here, first, there is a deepening realisation that some of the basic conceptual foundations of Western modernity – often expressed in dichotomies such as individual/society, public/private, culture/nature, male/female, material/immaterial, modern/traditional, and so on – are becoming less and less adequate to grasp the complexities of contemporary life. The downsides of this way of thinking are piling up. This leads to an interest in 'alter-modern' ways of thinking and conceiving the world. The resurgence of the commons – as a theoretical horizon and a social practice – is part of that. Second, decolonisation has enabled non-Western ways of thinking to be re-articulated more forcefully, as not only 'traditional' ways of thinking but as fully fledged cosmologies and philosophies in their own right. I think this poses really interesting challenges to the Western tradition, interesting because we realise that all concepts – both Western 'universals' as well as those coming from other cultural traditions, such as the notion of *ubuntu* you mentioned – are deeply embedded in and reflective of comprehensive cultural and historical settings. Hence, it's not easy to transfer concepts from one setting to another. During the process of colonisation, which Edward Said taught us is still ongoing on certain levels, this transfer of ideas was imposed with great violence, physical and epistemic. The challenge is to find other ways. Thus, for me, the notion of the commons, but also of *ubuntu*, serve initially as thinking tools, as way of using something that does not easily fit into my own context, technology-saturated Western culture, and use as a way to de-familiarise myself, to unlearn certain assumptions such as the dichotomies mentioned above. What this will lead to is open, but it's certainly not a direct import or simple synthesis.

WPCC: Some recent analysis in the book *Culture is Bad for You?* (Brook, O'Brien and Taylor 2020) based on participation and origins of cultural workers present a picture of low participation in many arts in the general UK population and highly disturbing trends in terms of equality discouraging new entrants seeking employment in the sector. Do contemporary forms of the arts have a class problem in addition to race and gender deficiencies: can the commons or commoning help here?

FS: The art system certainly has a class problem. Both in terms of who can afford to do art – which is, economically speaking, a high risk field with lots of up-front investment – as well

as the specific cultural habitus (in Bourdieu's sense) that defines the field. I don't think that inside the art field the concept of the commons can help much. What these approaches are about, in my opinion, is to make certain practices and resources within the art field available to those outside of it. So, rather than bringing people in, it allows things to seep out. A project like *aaaarg*,⁷ which is a very substantial repository of texts at the intersection of art, architecture and critical theory, curated by a large number of reading groups, has been motivated by artistic concerns of turning reading into a communal practice, but it has also served as a platform for scholars, researchers, and practitioners who have no access to leading university libraries to access texts they needed for whatever their practice happens to be.

CS: And remember, the art system has always had this class problem. It is not particularly bad *now*, the problem is part of the constitution of the field. And this refers to two aspects, as Felix already indicated, to the ones who produce art but also the ones who consume/view art. Both are elitist, which is why it is of interest to look at aesthetic practices that do not have to rely on the narrow demands of the art world. All of a sudden, people can do what they find relevant and exciting and do not need to worry about surviving this particular attention economy. The commons can help insofar as they are an encouragement to start from where you are, what your needs are and make that happen instead of thinking about what the system/art world needs to survive.

WPCC: Picking up from that, we were struck both by some things you say in the introduction to your recent book *Aesthetics of the Commons* (Sollfrank, Stalder and Niederberger eds. 2021) which you were kind enough to share in script form for this interview. This was a call for 'new social and technological 'imaginaries' within our very digital and technological age. The source of these you say will be 'various practices of commons-oriented digital cultures'. It seems that you are enthusiastic about the potential for some form of relative or partial autonomy from commodification and copyright that might provide the conditions for such. Do you see particular tactics as more fruitful than others for creating the right conditions for artists – such as some autonomy with recognition of interdependence – for these imaginaries to emerge? Could you expand on these themes?

CS: It is obvious that all innovation that is driven by profit-oriented organisations will always remain within the horizon of more exploitation and more profit. Therefore, what I mean with new technological imaginaries are new horizons beyond that limiting framework. Assuming that 'back to nature' is no option, this is the only option we have and we should put more resources in their development.

FS: Digital technologies are a key dimension of our collective social infrastructure in all areas of life and, as Cornelia said, it is important who develops them for what purpose and based on which ideas. The design of infrastructure is incredibly powerful, but its effects are often hidden. Only in exceptional circumstances – when they break apart or are otherwise revealed – do they become visible. We had quite a few of these revelatory moments recently, Snowden's leaks, the Cambridge Analytica scandal, the Covid-19 crisis, yet they seem to have changed very little. Part of that is that infrastructures, once in place, are hard to change, partly it is a lack of imagination, both theoretical and practical, about how to do things differently.

Thus, we need ideas and examples of how to do things differently, of how to move beyond the corporate, neoliberal framework which foregrounds individualism, private property and competition between possessive individuals. The projects we worked with all reject these basic notions, focussing instead on shared resources and collaborations, allowing for other types of subjectivation to occur. As art projects, they pay particular attention to affective dimensions, which are really important for imaginaries to really come to life.

WPCC: In your introduction you also say ‘Commons are structured by relations of care rather than ownership’. It has been very noticeable that ‘care’ has emerged as a key term in discussions of infrastructure in scholarly communications and academic publishing. Can you elaborate a little on ‘care’, arts and the commons? What might or does ‘care’ look like or feel like in this context?

FS: For me, the most basic question is how do we – collectively – relate to each other and the world around us? Capitalist modernity answered this question through the concept of private property. Everything is to be owned by natural or legal persons, and what was not owned in that way, is ready for the taking, be that communal land, traditional knowledge, or transactional data. Property infuses these relationships with a number of properties, such as exclusivity, hierarchy, transferability and so on. The commons are structured through different relations, and care expresses that difference. For example, relationships of care are non-exclusive, meaning the number of people who can care about something or someone is not limited and not sharply delineated. Ownership is binary, either you own, or you don’t. Care, however, is gradual. You can care more or less. Care, compared to ownership, is less hierarchical and more mutual, in the sense that care cannot be imposed, rather it requires voluntary acceptance, it is therefore not easily transferable.

CS: And with the notion of care you always get the notion of a form of labour that has traditionally been outside the economic exchange ratio – with both its positive and negative connotations. It can mean that this form of labour is not valued but it can also represent a different way of relating altogether. Joan C. Tronto and Berenice Fischer have defined caring as ‘everything that we do to maintain, continue, and repair “our” world so that we can live in it as well as possible. That world includes our bodies, our selves, and our environment, all of which we seek to interweave in a complex, life-sustaining web’.⁸ In this sense, caring is understood as an attitude that can inform any activities – including art and other aesthetic practices.

WPCC: Interesting you mention Joan Tronto and Berenice Fischer who are also mentioned by Samuel Moore in his article ‘The Care-full Commons’. He says ‘Thinking about commoning as care in this way moves away from the idea of a self-defined commons resource and towards acts of care that operate horizontally across a range of institutions ... The commons is therefore a situated practice of care positioned towards a commons horizon’ (Moore 2016). We’re not sure if this is close to your perspective or not in relation to art but would it be right to say that you would not see any opposition between (in the long run) the nourishing and self-sustaining practices of care, and artists’ need to pay bills and find the time to devote to their artistic work outside of traditional structures of ownership? We wonder how easy you think it can be in the attention economy for artists to shed the centuries-ingrained habit of competing in favour of care, curation and mutual nurturing?

CS: Thank you for bringing the hard material aspects to the discourse on care and commons. All too often, it remains in this cloud of being well-intentioned and assuming everybody has an academic job that pays the bills. On the other hand, in practice, many people are ready to collaborate with others, to share resources and experiment with new ways of working and living, simply, because they have enough of how things are going at the moment. Our ways of working and our ways of living are not sustainable. And this is not just true for CO2 emitting technologies; it is the same in academia and the arts. The funding logic requires to constantly produce new papers, books, works regardless of quality and sustainability. Recently, a curator said to me, she has the feeling of being confronted with a throwaway culture in the arts, also because there is no interest and no funding for the preservation of works that need a lot of care such as digital or code-based works. Striving for a change on a personal level is a good way to start but it will remain futile without new economic models. The problem is that for

too long, this fiction of a capitalist society has been hold up against seriously thinking about other and more sustainable economic models. But it has started, many people want it, now politics has to respond adequately in order to remain – or become again – trustworthy, but this will involve finding new and probably inconvenient measures.

WPCC: Do we need new copyright or intellectual property or ‘commons’ laws? What would be worth pushing for in a new decade?

FS: It’s clear that copyright – based on originality and individual authorship – is ill-suited for the contemporary world. Philosophically, we know that both of these concepts are fictitious. Today, also everyday experience with digital media suggest strongly that nothing is ever created *ex-nihilo* and that always more than one person is involved. But rather than updating the balance between individual and collective interests – copyright in the age of print did express this through exceptions (such as fair use) and limitations (e.g. copyright expires) – it has been tilted in favour of the former through various changes in the law. However, everyday practice is moving in the other direction, and today’s participatory, user-driven culture embodies already a post-copyright dimension. However, given the nastiness of online discourse and the far-right’s use of memes and other elements of digital culture, post-copyright is not politically progressive, per se.

But I’ve spent too much time on these issues to believe that the law can be changed for the better anytime soon. Reduction of property rights is a fundamental challenge to the very purpose of the liberal state. So, I think rather than changing copyright law, we need to fight to get funding for non-market activities; get away from things that produce property, to processes that produce commons. The most obvious example would be to demand that public money is used to develop a free software eco-system, open educational resources, open data etc. Also the art system needs to think how to generate more commons resources by putting more materials in the public domain and by financing more institutions that do so. There are examples of museums, such as the Rijksmuseum⁹ in Amsterdam, which put high-res scans of all of their holdings online, available for re-use. But they are still the exception. It seems obvious to me that rethinking memory institutions as repositories of the commons, but culturally, it requires not just the right kind of funding, but also a significant shift in the internal culture of these institutions. All too often, they see themselves still as guardians of precious artifacts that need to be protected, or, if they are sufficiently neoliberal, monetised. Both means, keeping access restricted.

CS: I agree with most of what you say, Felix. Copyright is just a symptom of the problem, the problem of organizing social and cultural relations along exchanging commodities. Nevertheless, I see the state has a responsibility to protect commons from being privatised which is happening all the time and everywhere. But this has to do with the general set of values. Is the purpose of the state to provide ideal conditions for capital to flourish or for its citizens to lead happy and healthy lives?

FS: Yes, the state has a responsibility to support and enable non-market forms of production and of care. The main point is, I don’t believe anymore – as I did, say, 15 years ago – that the reform of copyright is a suitable strategy in this regard.

WPCC: So what then would be a suitable strategy? For many people in neoliberal states it seems far from self-evident that the ‘state has a responsibility to support and enable non-market forms of production and of care’ which is really disappointing. Do you think there needs to be a media commons of some kind as a precondition for re-establishing this principle particularly in relation to support for the arts? State support for the arts has been diluted in many countries in favour of crowdfunding platforms, corporate sponsorship or billionaire philanthropy all of which exact a high price (in different ways) for their backing.

CS: Indeed, it is weird listening to ourselves, how much we count on the state and on politics for responding to people's needs and implementing change. And there are not only neoliberal states that become more and more dysfunctional but also the ones who have always been so corrupt that only small elites could have a good life there. But I am afraid that initiatives from below need support from above to be able to flourish. You mention art funding but it applies to all areas of life, education, healthcare, climate etc. There are strong forces, at the moment, especially in the younger generation, to fight for change in many respects, and they will be listened to, slowly. In the meantime, the machine keeps running.

FS: The commons are often claimed to be 'beyond the market and the state'. But this is not a good way of thinking about it. They are not independent of it, rather, each of these three modes of social coordination is embedded in the others. At the moment, the state is set up to create and support markets at the expense of all other ways of creating the social. The situation reminds me of what Jean Ziegler¹⁰ remarked about the relation between the global north and the global south: the issue is not to give more, but to steal less.

Thus, we need not simply more cultural funding for marginal practices, and certainly not more philanthropy. Rather, we need more processes and institutions that create solidarity and cooperation, but they cannot be outside of the state and the market. I've already mentioned the need to use public money for open source code and open educational resources. That would create a different kind of market. But we can go much further, for example re-envisioning public institutions, such as public broadcasting as part of a commons. And I mean not just opening the archive for re-use, or donating materials to Wikipedia. That's all fine and we need more of that too, but we should go much further. It pains me to see all the public institutions moving their activities during the lockdown to the private infrastructures such as Zoom. Why isn't that provided by the BBC or the ZDF or some consortium of European universities? Technically speaking, this is not rocket science.

Many of the seeds for such institutions are there, lots of small companies, NGOs and civic associations that could grow if the conditions were not so biased against them. Lots of civil society initiatives that are working on a wide range of issues, but do so in isolation, each struggling alone against a hostile environment.

WPCC: Thank you.

Notes

¹ The poetry of archiving, interview by Cornelia Sollfrank with the founder Kenneth Goldsmith. Available at <http://creatingcommons.zhdk.ch/the-poetry-of-archiving-kenneth-goldsmith>.

² See http://wiki.erg.be/m/#Bienvenue_%C3%A0_l%E2%80%99erg.

³ Interview with Laurence Rassel: Rethinking the Art School. Talk 1 March 2018, HeK (House of Electronic Arts Basel). Available at <http://creatingcommons.zhdk.ch/rethinking-the-art-school>.

⁴ See www.furtherfield.org.

⁵ See <https://www.documenta.de/en/documenta-fifteen/#news>.

⁶ Documenta Fifteen and lumbung practice. Announcement of the first lumbung-members. 18 June 2020. Biennial Foundation. Available at: <https://www.biennialfoundation.org/2020/06/documenta-fifteen-and-lumbung-practice-announcement-of-the-first-lumbung-members>.

⁷ See <https://monoskop.org/Aaaaarg>.

⁸ This definition, which Tronto and Fischer formulated together, is quoted here from Tronto's 1993 book *Moral Boundaries: A Political Argument for an Ethic of Care*, p. 103 (New York: Routledge).

⁹ See <https://www.rijksmuseum.nl/nl>.

¹⁰ Jean Ziegler (1934–). Special rapporteur on the Right to Food (2000–2008) United Nations and former Professor of Sociology at the Sorbonne and University of Geneva.

Competing Interests

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

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