
The Inflexions of the Undercommons

Lingering Ghosts: (Un)Answered Questions, (Un)Present Speakers, (Un)Read Books and Readers?

Katja Čičigoj, Stefan Apostolou-Hölscher and Martina Ruhsam

Introduction

The following text has a couple of authors – some of them formulated these sentences which are a result of processing the propositions of others. It is the product of what might be called social cooperation, if the meaning of this term, like many others, would not have become empty due to time and economic pressure and surplus value since quite a while already. Clear is that everything is an assemblage of the content of several email-attachments that came together online and that are themselves compilations of notes and drafts – written for the preparation, during or after a conference – by then dwelling on three distinct computers. The text was developed without a single physical meeting (after the conference) of those who wrote it. We cannot remember who did what or how we got here even. The “we” occasionally used in this text is highly ambiguous and obscure and will remain like that. Seen from the perspective of its final format it is difficult to say from where we started and what came from whom, though what we wrote departed from a conference entitled “The Public

Commons and the Undercommons of Art, Education, and Labour” that took place at Frankfurt LAB in Frankfurt am Main from May 29 till June 1 2014. [1]

In what follows not only different perspectives on what has been happening cross each other's thresholds but also different layers of time overlap. When we wrote what you're now reading, we seriously tried not to follow *chronos*, not to make distinct and chrono-logical steps in retrospect by ascribing thoughts to consecutive speakers but to interweave different voices with our own and to interlace propositions presented at the conference with absent or imaginary speakers, fragmentary thoughts and still fermenting questions. Nevertheless, we ended up with a linear text again – as if to sustain multiplicity was at least as impossible as to cooperate socially.

Really.

But we still have hope.

In the field of cultural and artistic production today things are not just produced through social relations. What is first and foremost produced are social situations themselves. It is sociality itself that is the main result of our work. And if our ability to produce the social relations that our work requires, actually separates ourselves from them (Jason Read) – as it was also the case in the course of the development of this text – if through the production of this sociality we isolate ourselves evermore, how could we then re-conceive of social relations in a radically different way? Do they tend to elude acts of intentional construction and production or do we have to dedicate more effort into their facilitation? In consideration of Read's contribution at the conference it becomes clear that we cannot think in old Marxistic terms – suggesting a progress from a form of commodity exchange to a form of cooperative labor – any more.

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Triggered by Read's diagnosis that "synaptic labour" (Stefano Harney) – the putting of our capacity to connect and form relations to work – actually produces ever more isolation and social alienation, Bojana Kunst asks "but how to move beyond such a diagnosis of symptoms?" How to start thinking towards concrete proposals (for action)?

Since some years a new development can be observed in various (visual) art fields as well as in the ones of choreography. Through the introduction of art practice-based PhDs already established or yet emerging actors in these domains are enabled to enter the academia for the purpose of achieving grants and graduations. Thereby they are not only prompted to critically reflect on their ways of doing and making or to provide discursive layers for their specific activities but also to consider their appropriate outputs as products of knowledge production. What previously could only hardly be measured by means of the knowledge economy and what exceeded its standards now moves into its very centre: Creativity and its never fully calculable surplus: *For there neither is, nor can be, a science of the beautiful, and the judgement of taste is not determinable by principles*, Immanuel Kant famously wrote in his *Critique of Judgement*. He seems to be proven wrong by contemporary developments, which, on the opposite, rather approximate "art" and "science." Their encounter is deeply ambivalent. On the one hand it triggers a creative understanding of knowledge – broadly speaking, the latter then becomes not only a knowledge *about* art but one *of* it –, on the other hand the same tendency opens the doors for a wider spread professionalization that fits perfectly well into a neoliberal environment.

Though a certain discrepancy between the readiness for action and theoretical proposals could be outlined, some movements that went "beyond" the detection of symptoms were indeed put forward, perhaps not always concretely. But should they always necessarily be concrete? (This also opens the question of the relation between theory and (political) practice – or perhaps even why (or whether at all) this has to be thought as a relation between two external and distinct practices.)

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Lingering Propositions

1. UNREPAYABLE DEBT beyond guilt and credit or even credit as mutual relation: giving each other credit with no quantifiable return? (Stefano Harney, Randy Martin)

- What would be the distinct temporality of an unrepayable debt and of giving each other credit? (contrary to what Maurizio Lazzarato writes about the specific temporality of debt: closing off the future by buying the present (life), projecting the present upon the future (endless repaying and reparation) - i.e. in student loans - we assure that in the future we will keep working as we do now since we will need to repay the student debt, etc.

From The Undercommons: *"Politics proposes to make us better, but we were good already in the mutual debt that can never be made good. We owe it to each other to falsify the institution, to make politics incorrect, to lie to our own determination. We owe each other the indeterminate. We owe each other everything."*

Already before recent formations and schedulings of further artistic PhDs were initiated, artistic working processes became entangled in a specific cooperation of institutions. Due to synergies, respectively grown interferences and (financial) dependencies between formerly distinct institutions such as MA programs, residency venues, and production houses, the making of choreography could be described in terms of what Stefano Harney and Fred Moten point out as the paradoxical universality of profession: *There is no point in trying to hold out the university against its professionalization. They are the same.*

2. Different social ontologies beyond the individual versus society-dualism:
THE DIVIDUAL (Raunig, Read, and others drawing on Deleuze-

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Simondon); a more complex rethinking of the THE PRE-INDIVIDUAL AND TRANS-INDIVIDUAL.

- How does a different social ontology enable us to think society and political action differently?

Although there are a lot of positive and welcome advantages about art practice-based PhDs (above all the fact that they help to challenge the very distinction between “art” and “science” at least), their danger clearly consists in involuntarily supporting the unfolding of a development in whose course, if the immeasurability of artistic production should nevertheless be fully measured once, collective activities and shared creativities of people would get more and more privatized. This, in the very worst case, would lead to yet unknown exclusions and perfidious control mechanisms. If the ideal of *universitas*, stemming from 18th century Enlightenment, is confronted with its only apparently opposite, if professionalization is assumed to be the very core of the university, a number of questions come up with regard to the implantation of art practice-based PhDs into it: Until what degree can artistic practices be turned into scientific practices through their professionalization? Or is it the other way around? Does science become aestheticized through its encounter with art? Which concepts of art and science underscore the precarious analogies underlying such attempts? Here another but adjacent problem is involved: In how far do financial aspects play a role in artist’s decisions to return to an educational framework after a certain time “out there” in order to work on their doctoral theses? Is it also because other venues cannot sufficiently afford the necessary support for their activities in this respect? Is it as well a lack of continuity and sustainability that supports their turning towards the university? What kind of impact has an academic background on methodological procedures?

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3. SELF-ORGANISATION AS A COMMON-IZING PROCESS

- The common as a process of production, not a given to defend.

Gigi Roggero (in his contribution for the reader; he was absent from the conference): *“the common is a matter of production; it is what is at stake in the struggles; it is beyond and against the dialectic between public and private. The common is embodied in the living labour cooperation. Or to use other words, the living labor has nothing else to defend apart from the autonomous cooperation, the common it continuously produces and reproduces.”*

- How does self-organisation (in a commonizing process, i.e. of cultural workers in Yugoslavia Gal Kirn talked about, but also in the self-organisation of student protests today, of Occupy movements, etc.) differ from late capitalist self-management?

- What is the relation between self-organisation and autonomy and moreover between self-organisation and the sovereignty of the subject? – From *The Undercommons*: *“What the beyond of teaching is really about is not finishing oneself, not passing, not completing; it’s about allowing subjectivity to be unlawfully overcome by others, a radical passion and passivity such that one becomes unfit for subjection, because one does not possess the kind of agency that can hold the regulatory forces of subjecthood, and one cannot initiate the auto-interpellative torque that biopower subjection requires and rewards.”*

- What about the relation between self-organisation and the state or rather between self-organisation and “instituent practices” (Gerald Raunig) / existing institutions? Which concepts of the state (i.e. socialist Yugoslavia, contemporary Switzerland, Great Britain, the US, Germany etc.) and its institutions are at play when we talk about self-organisation, commonizing, the university etc. and in what way do they differ from each other? What kinds of “art, labour and education” are we actually talking about or what are the different

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understandings that are underlying these concepts in diverse geographical, cultural and sociopolitical contexts?

Which new hierarchies and exclusions are raised by the professionalization of the Commons? Could the logic of professionalization, in a far future, even limit the access to art venues in general for those without the respective graduations? Already now it is quite easy to detect that if people have not studied at certain schools, they can hardly enter the applicable networks of circulation for the purpose to achieve visibility with what they are doing and making. Seen from that perspective, art practice-based PhDs could even be diagnosed as yet another step toward the protocols of the society of control.

4. CARE (to pick up on critical hints from Marta Keil, Sergej Pristaš, but also Bojana Mladenovic talking about “curating as caring for”)

- Can we think of it beyond pastoral/patriarchal/patronizing attitudes of/from the state or others; beyond a credit-relation to the state (we pay taxes and by that buy the right to be cared-for in case of need or in public-service)? As mutual care arising from the unrepayable debt we have towards each other? Based on our non-individuality (dividuality?) as social beings? On our social-ontological precariousness and made acutely necessary by contemporary political processes of (almost universal) progressive precarisation (Isabell Lorey in the reader, though absent from the conference - in reference to Judith Butler)?
- Can this be a concept and a strategy for commonizing processes without recourses to autonomy and sovereignty?
- What are concrete strategies of mutual care (already in the undercommons - or yet to be invented)- infrastructure, self-organisation, community economies, etc.?

What are the Undercommons then? In their groundbreaking essay *The University and the Undercommons* Harney and Moten describe a tendency that is not only

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valid for the contemporary academia in the US but has also been unfolding on a rather international level, the latest since the Bologna reforms were decided by 29 European ministers of education in 1999. Harney and Moten paradoxically identify the idea of *universitas as such* with its professionalization and thereby – being inspired by the operaist assumption that living labor would always be creative whilst capital could only react to its inventions – juxtapose the *mass intellectuality* of what they call the Undercommons with a *privatization* of (knowledge) practices through their imprisonment inside the walls of the academia: “The *Universitas* is always a state/ State strategy,” they claim. In comparison the Undercommons as maroons rather act against their administration by state apparatuses.

PERSISTENT QUESTIONS

1. ONTO-METHODOLOGY: creation of concepts (D&G):
theory/philosophy as poetic practice versus a scientific attitude of understanding the world
 - raised as a problem of metaphoric poetic language, this may be more than a mere question of rhetorics: PHILOSOPHICAL-POLITICAL POIESIS can amount also to the CREATION OF POLITICAL IMAGINATION against “capitalist realism”
 - i.e. recognizing the immense political productivity and creativity of innumerable practical readings of concepts such as the Multitude, the Commons, and the Empire from Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt or performativity from Judith Butler – regardless of what our theoretical assessment of them might be in terms of how much they “scientifically” can correspond to concrete social realities.
 - so what is the poetic practice of the Undercommons as a concept? Can we envisage its political poesis (and how to think of it in this temporal order, if the Undercommons is always already here – see next point)?

2. EPISTEMOLOGY/POLITICS: Where and how can we find/see the Undercommons at work? If they are always already here, they risk becoming ubiquitous and we risk not to spot them... And on the other hand - why should we spot them at all, if they are always already here?
- There seems to be an onto-political tension between "THE ALWAYS ALREADY" and "the contrary to what is": between assigning value to the potential of what is already (the undercommons of study as always already going on) AND DEMANDING A RADICAL CHANGE OR BRAKE, infrastructural change etc. (for if what we are looking for is already here - it seems we necessitate no political work anymore)
 - Does the recognition of the "always already" of the undercommons call for being complemented by political work on what is not (yet)? Can we think of these two attitudes together, but not merely in terms of a complementary "peaceful coexistence"? Can they inform each other - and how?

About the Undercommons as Being... Always Already There

"They saw our bad debt coming a mile off. [...] Anywhere bad debt elaborates itself. Anywhere you can stay, conserve yourself, plan. A few minutes, a few days when you cannot hear them say there is something wrong with you."

The Undercommons - Against Politics?

The intentional work of subjects towards a clear goal:

"Our task is the self-defence of the surround in the face of repeated, targeted dispossessions through the settler's armed incursion. And while acquisitive violence occasions this self-defence, it is recourse

to self-possession in the face of dispossession (recourse, in other words, to politics) that represents the real danger. Politics is an ongoing attack on the common – the general and generative antagonism – from within the surround” [...] We surround democracy’s false image in order to unsettle it. Every time it tries to enclose us in a decision, we’re undecided. Every time it tries to represent our will, we’re unwilling” (Harney & Moten 17-19).

An abdication of political responsibility? OK. Whatever. We’re just anti-politically romantic about actually existing social life. We aren’t responsible for politics. We are the general antagonism to politics looming outside every attempt to politicise, every imposition of self-governance, every sovereign decision and its degraded miniature, every emergent state and home sweet home. We are disruption and consent to disruption. We preserve upheaval. Sent to fulfil by abolishing, to renew by unsettling, to open the enclosure whose immeasurable venality is inversely proportionate to its actual area, we got politics surrounded. We cannot represent ourselves. We can’t be represented.”

3. THE INFORMAL/The need of FORMATION/DIS-/RE-FORMATION:
 - “the informal” is proposed by Harney and Moten as a way of thinking about the Undercommons; but when reflecting back on the specific conference set-up and how it worked out in the end in terms of in-forming the way our discussions proceeded, it struck me how perhaps what we think of as “the informal” is always already informed by pre-formed relations and positions (also in the specific case of this conference, but not only): how therefore a mere “via negative” of formal openness might not be enough for everyone to feel addressed and included (does everyone need to be addressed and included at all, however, or are we bound to always form specific regimes of address and inclusion/exclusion?)
 - The question might therefore not be how to form the informal (paradox?), but how can a pre-formed and informed “informal” set-up

be dis-formed and re-formed otherwise in order to enable i.e. an emergence of a situation of study?

- Is study really “the informal” or does it need some kind of formation to take place, to enable a study to occur? Is study itself a kind of dis- and re-formation, neither the formation ex nihilo, nor the creation of a supposed informal?

4. (IM)PATIENCE AND (LACK OF) RESULTS:

- Bojana Kunst asked - why do we seem to be very patient when discussing the minute theoretical discrepancies, but impatient when faced with concrete practices and propositions? - To bring it further, does this indicate our inability to cross contextual boundaries or is there something inherent in contemporary modes of power operations that makes us prone to abstract assessment but reluctant to concrete propositions (unable to go “beyond the symptom”)?
- Randy Martin asked whether our inclination towards self-assessment makes us perhaps too impatient to see and produce results. How to enable the afterlife of the conference to linger?

Cartography of Symptomatic Developments and Problems

1. STRUCTURAL IMPOSSIBILITY

Referring to the paradoxical situation in which we usually find ourselves if we – while claiming or aiming to be part of the undercommons – are deeply entangled with the problem of the commons as soon as we work to make a living. (This shaking standpoint can also be observed if artists criticize the institution in their work while their pieces or projects are passed on from institution to institution.) As soon as we have to earn money our hands become dirty because we become part of the social/political system we try to oppose, hence it is difficult to draw a demarcation line between the commons and the undercommons or the critical academic and the subversive intellectual. Honestly speaking, all of us who are

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writing this, are entangled in both. Is there a critical culture that comprises both of them? (Ana Vujanović)

2. Constantly being in modes of producing while the WORK IS OUTSOURCED TO PRIVATE SPACES in front of the computer (Bojana Cvejić)

3. THE SHIFT FROM COLLABORATION AS A RESISTANT STRATEGY TO COLLABORATION AS A REQUIREMENT

Whereas collaboration was conceived as a resistant mode of artistic production – related to a set of artistic and socio-political utopias in the 1960s, it has become an essential component and requirement for new modes of production in the context of neoliberalism and by now dismayingly resembles the dominant narrative of creative capitalism with its praise of plasticity, fluidity, networking, flexibility etc. (Boyan Manchev). One can observe a transformation of the aim to connect people and the whole discourse that evolved around relations and relational aesthetics (in the wake of Nicolas Bourriaud’s well-known book *Relational Aesthetics*) from being a critical tool to becoming a normative discourse or practise. What are the consequences of the institutionalisation of the discourse that evolved around intersubjective relations in the performing arts and how does this development react upon artistic practices and conversely?

4. HAS THE SHIFT AWAY FROM THE PRODUCT AND TOWARDS THE PROCESS LOST ITS RESISTANT MOMENTUM?

Boyan Manchev outlines that his move has once connoted a resistance against constant production and sprang from the belief that the process could not be commodified; that focussing on the process would hence be a gesture of resistance against the commodification of art-objects. But in our stage of “performance capitalism” (Manchev) that pretends that there is no loss, no waste and no finitude, every resistant strategy can perfectly be appropriated by performance capitalism – the working process inclusively.

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A certain fetishisation of the process that followed the fetishisation of the object or product as an attempt to counter the latter resulted in the commodification of the artistic process or labour that are goods by themselves now (Sergej Pristaš). Are art institutions today places that are first and foremost dedicated to the promotion of artistic labour and the reproduction of consumer relations as Pristaš claims?

5. THE COMMONS OF EDUCATION

Education based on a rigid exchange of information, experiences and consensus whereas critique is in function of maintaining equilibrium. To resist the tendency that a fast accumulation of information becomes the ultimate goal (or exchange-product) in a university as privatized industry that trains flexible students to become quick absorbers in order to be fit for marketable pursuits.

To Continue Proposing - Again and Again: Lines of Flight

THE UNDERCOMMONS, THE INFORMAL & THEIR CRITIQUE OF SOVEREIGNTY

The Undercommons are connected with the persistence of the informal that is in no account a mere natural occurrence but has to be on the contrary permanently created, organized and fostered. (Stefano Harney) This informal - as unfinished and vaguely wrong - can be a place of resistance against sovereign politics and is according to Harney's explanation connected with the temporal condition of making and creating time and with a certain deregulation of the rigid organisation of universities in terms of spatial and temporal settings that would counter the rhythm of what he calls "synaptic labour" - understood as a constant reanimation or reassembling of the assembly line. This would lead to:

COUNTERSPECULATION

Study as a form of counterspeculation - dedicated to the question: how can we think outside or beyond the rhythms and the efficiency of synaptic labour?

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BUT

“Would it not mean that to be critical of the university would make one the professional par excellence, more negligent than any other? To distance oneself professionally through critique, is this not the most active consent to privatize the social individual?” (Stefano Harney & Fred Moten)

YET ANOTHER PARADOX

How can I be an “emigrant from conscription” (Harney and Moten)? This could be the question of a professional who read the text of Harney and Moten and tries to thereafter engage into the diligent business of the emigrant that Harney and Moten call for. But this diligence would be one that follows a prescribed refuge and hence one that would be conscripted too.

SO?

COUNTERSPECULATION!

DISORGANISATION

The potential that a collective disorganised study might bear. A learning of/in/as disorganisation would have to invent and test possibilities to intervene. But isn't it impossible to organize disorganisation?

THE RIGHT OF A CERTAIN OBSCURITY OF PRODUCTION

Today an artwork is not valorised after it is produced and shown, it is likely that the valorisation is imposed on the work beforehand in relation to a production of desire (Sergej Pristaš).

RESISTANCE

How can we resist the call of conscription as artists and avoid performing the perfectly flexible, mobile, precarious, creative individual (that could perfectly be

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recruited for any kind of challenging business or creative industry and nearby upgrades delapidated neighbourhoods)? How to counterpose the hegemonic demand to squeeze or exploit every potential relentlessly?

THE INVENTION OF NEW SPACES AND CO-WORKING STRATEGIES

The development of infrastructural facilities and the creation of situations that enable exchange without focussing exclusively on resulting products (for instance the ID_Frankfurt: <http://www.frankdances.org/idfrankfurt/>)

TO RISK THE ENDEAVOUR OF SPECULATIVE THINKING

Semiotic politics often operate in terms of limiting imaginative capacities and solidifying the boundaries of the thinkable as defined by the context we are situated in. Hence, a radical break or rupture with the status quo would also demand an exodus from these prevailing semiotics in order to not operate “with the same weapons” that the enemy is using (to quote Mårten Spångberg referring to Levi Bryant) or in order to keep the semiotic system open for poetic in(ter)vention. Might adopting another perspective (the dog, the alien, the thing?) or conceiving another horizon of thought (a flat ontology) in the hope that this difference in perspective will enable us to change a certain structure, help? Do we have to re-think agency – assumed to be the privilege of human individuals and groups – and shift our awareness to our alliances and interdependencies with non-human, inanimate, technological and alien entities?

TO RECOGNISE ABUNDANCE IN THE PLACES OF ALLEGED SCARCITY

SUBVERSIVE AFFIRMATION

The boycott-group (assembled students of the Institute of Applied Theatre Studies at the Justus-Liebig-University in Gießen) presented their act of subversive affirmation in response to a call of the Maxim Gorki theatre in Berlin that invited young makers to present pieces under the motto “Rehearse rebellion” (“Aufstand proben”) in 2013. By occupying the stage of the theatre the

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boycott-group decided to refuse to perform if there are no fees for the performers but to perform this refusal on the stage of the theatre instead of dismissing the invitation. The group answered the call with an intrusion of the real and demonstrated real resistance against the exploitative working conditions imposed by the theatre instead of displaying a represented or rehearsed one. Is subversive affirmation one of the only options left? Do we have to use the institutions to articulate our refusals or counter-propositions in regard to the offered working conditions? Do we have to betray the dispositif of representation by still opting for being in it?

How can we keep asking questions, stay curious and continue to make our voices heard while at the same time avoiding to perform a professional criticality – in the way Harney and Moten criticize it? How can we avoid a criticality that is performed in order to keep up a certain ritual of self-display as professional routine? How can we instead practice an affirmative criticality that is not resulting from a withdrawal into a distant position outside but that would spring from the wish to affirm and spur ways of thinking, doing and perceiving that don't comply with the neoliberal rationale and its incessant search for marketable outputs?

In this sense we would then ask – and persist to ask – not to keep the academic ritual going but as a matter of curiosity and real interest – how can we be critical in the closest proximity – by being committed to a passion of thinking that is dedicated to the poetic potential of theory and that scrutinizes categories and practices that pretend timeless stability or self-evident relevance? But a thinking that is not self-satisfied with the performance of its criticality. A thinking that ultimately seeks an affirmative performative practice. And one that claims time as the fundamental condition for any thought/practice/change to occur.

Notes

[1] The conference was hosted by the MA program Choreography and Performance at the Institute for Applied Theatre Studies in Gießen. For more information see www.tinyurl.com/nlsmzem and the archive of video recordings at www.vimeo.com/channels/762870. The conference proceedings will be published as a book in 2015.

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