

The Commonplace I Sing

By Anne Faucheret

“THE COMMONPLACE.

The commonplace I sing:

How cheap is health! how cheap nobility!

Abstinence, no falsehood, no gluttony, lust;

The open air I sing, freedom, toleration,

(Take here the mainest lesson—less from books—less from the schools.)

The common day and night—the common earth and waters,

Your farm—your work, trade, occupation,

The democratic wisdom underneath, like solid ground for all.”

— Walt Whitman, *Leaves of Grass*, 1891–1892 (1)

“We are so shaken by the changes our regions are undergoing, and the lack of any serious political perspective is so glaring, that we fail to stand up calmly and focus on what truly matters for each individual, for the ecology of collectives and communities. [...] The ecology of knowledge should encompass our daily experiences and be decisive for our choices about where we want to live and what kind of experience we want to share as a community. We must be critical of this idea of humanity as a homogeneous whole, where consumption plays a decisive role in relationships.”

— Ailton Krenak, *Ideas to Postpone the End of the World*, 2019 (2)

“Can we imagine reconstructing our lives around the centrality of our relations with other humans and with animals, waters, plants, rather than letting them be destroyed by the invasion of robots and the dream of a technological overcoming of all our limitations? This is the horizon that the discourse and politics of the commons open for us today: not the promise of a return to the past but the possibility of recovering our collective power to determine our life on this earth. This is what I call the re-enchantment of the world.”

— Silvia Federici, *Re-enchanting the World: Feminism and the Politics of the Commons*, 2018 (3)

A dual threat looms over all forms of life and shared existence today: the resurgence of fascism and the danger of a global environmental catastrophe. It is as vast as the entire apparatus of globalization, which, through political decisions, economic mechanisms, and medical-technical-industrial constructs, drives the plunder of natural resources, the exploitation of human and non-human labor, the commodification of life, and the destruction of the environment. This late capitalist apparatus creates connections down to the smallest ramifications, yet it also produces isolation: globalized communication, networking, and logistics paradoxically lead to an impoverishment of social relationships, making them fragile and limiting them to a few unavoidable areas of life, primarily the family and businesses. Moreover, neoliberal capitalism robs people of their agency and awareness of shared responsibility for the world by marginalizing the historical solidarity between humans and other species and the forms of care that emerged alongside the trade economy from systems of giving and taking. Representative democracy, wherever it exists, together with the dominant system, conveys the illusion of relationships based on responsibility and meaning.

How can we re-establish social connections?

How can we (re)build or revitalize the commons?

How can we reinhabit the world?

What ideas and approaches exist to postpone the end?

The horizon opened by these questions demands a radical change of direction, which can only be initiated by civil society and independent organizations, as the philosopher and theologian Ivan Illich previously stated. He had noted that the educational, cultural, and social institutions created and managed by the state and public bodies, which should foster the emergence of a social fabric, in reality only produce commercial relationships and structures of dominance (4). Economic degrowth, coexistence in society, and ecological solidarity, supported by civil society—particularly by artists and activists—offer tools for dismantling a deadly system by combining concrete social and artistic approaches based on broadly conceived reform methods. These aim to foster the emergence of new forms of creativity and circular economy, sharing and management, debate, and responsibility.

Such temporary forms are developed by Irena Eden and Stijn Lernout with their project Common Grounds, a series of nine public events in Vienna that took place in September 2021 between two waves of the COVID-19 pandemic. The plural title refers to the multifaceted linguistic meaning of the term and the artists' willingness to explore it. In the singular, common ground most commonly

refers to a shared basis in a discussion, a foundation on which a debate can be conducted, even with differing viewpoints. More broadly, common ground denotes a shared understanding in an almost anthropological sense—the ability to live in a community, which is both a prerequisite for our survival and an unattainable ideal. Finally, in a literal yet poetic sense, common ground is the ground beneath our feet that we share, the Earth, what Walt Whitman calls the commonplace (1). The Common Grounds project is based on all these meanings and many more. For each event in the series—which may take the form of a discussion, film screening, performance, or reading—a keyword was chosen to represent a theme or approach defined collaboratively by the audience and the artist duo. Ultimately, a subjective, non-exhaustive, yet no less meaningful constellation emerges around the concepts of common grounds and commons: resistance, space/living (6), fragility (14), being on the move (12), solidarity (5), change (13), cooperation (7), closeness (8), fear (9). This thematic constellation is accompanied by a spatial one, with each event taking place in a different district of the Austrian capital.

The artists took care to select spaces such as larger and smaller squares that people pass through but also linger in—spaces free from consumption pressure, located on the fringes of commercial areas. The diversity of formats, themes, locations, and profiles of participants—artists, architects, sociologists, dramaturgs, and researchers—enables a multidisciplinary yet non-systematic, pluralistic yet always subjective, organized yet not prefabricated approach at the project level. This creates an open space for the horizontal circulation of knowledge, varied forms of participation, serendipity, and surprises. The goal is not to invite experts to enlighten or politicize but to enable a polyphony of individual voices and let the chemistry work—or not. A simple and generous framework, along with an equally open dramaturgy, supports the interventions, where hospitality and conviviality are central to the project. The mobile kitchen and its seating furniture, designed by the duo, shape a space where the shared meal, cooked on-site by Stijn Lernout, is a key moment, as is the intervention and the discussion that sometimes follows. Irena Eden and Stijn Lernout create autonomous, temporary spaces for shared experiences and the conditions for intentional or chance encounters between organizers, contributors, and a diverse audience, which, depending on the evening, may consist of interested individuals, local residents, the curious, or perhaps people in precarious situations or isolation. The project counters prevailing indifference and disinterest with newly formed connections. These connections arise from the awareness of inhabiting a place rather than merely passing through it, as Silvia Federici describes when she speaks of the ability to form “communal relationships” and the need to live on “this human earth” not as a stranger or intruder, as capitalism desires, but as if at home (3; 11). The urban space is the quintessential space for

communal life. Yet, for decades, it has been under attack from commercialization, privatization, and fragmentation, transforming it into an abstract space of transit and consumption.

The Common Grounds project is an impetus to reshape relationships in public space by attempting, for one evening, to revive neighborly bonds or resistance against isolation and to let solidarity take shape at the local level of the neighborhood. Lived solidarity in neighborhoods, as opposed to the often invoked discourse of national social cohesion, is one of the themes explored by sociologist and researcher of social and anti-racist movements Niki Kubaczek (5).

Two projects address how urban space is occupied—by individuals or groups, in the past or future—depending on whether the space is private or public, associated with a home or an institution. A dialogue between architecture and sociology with Simon Andreas Güntner and Christiane Feuerstein seeks to assess the impact of space appropriation on the structure of social relationships—particularly in neighborhoods—and on how urban spaces are inhabited and designed (6). Anthropologist Elisabeth Oberzaucher, in a lecture on evolutionary biology, questions what spatial survival strategies we must adopt in light of future challenges—climate crisis and social precarity—particularly rethinking cooperation and coexistence in public spaces (7). By creating temporary real-space alternatives and collectively imagining possible future spaces, Common Grounds invites us to build new places, reshape standardized encounter patterns in specific spaces through interaction with other bodies and objects, and recognize that seemingly isolated problems or conflicts share a common root. How do we inhabit and create space on a basis other than passivity and dispossession? This is one of the questions running through the Common Grounds project and is also addressed by Marxist and existentialist sociologist Henri Lefebvre in his examination of the urbanization of society and the alienation of contemporary forms of life. In his view, abstraction, fragmentation—the division of space into marketable parts—and the homogenization of space, where market value overrides use value and levels it, contribute in capitalism to the transformation of everyday life into a site of carefully monitored exploitation and societal passivity, losing its capacity to create space. Lefebvre proposes reshaping the “use of space” and “images of space” through “alternative spatial imaginations”, where artistic activities and approaches, free from dominant orders and discourses, can challenge existing social relationships and create a space for new ones to emerge (15). Alternative spatial imaginations belong to the realm of the imaginary, the speculative, memory, and the transformation of perception. They appear as a line of flight traced above the existing capitalist space. The film *First Landscape # Mirka* by Miriam Bajtala attempts, through narration and memories, to align images of the external world with inner landscapes and explore the interplay of collective and individual memories (8). Hannah Binder’s performance

reactivates childhood fears and questions narcissistic drives, herd instincts, capitalist individualism, and existential loneliness (9). Behind these projects, new ways of inhabiting the city and the world emerge—not to save ourselves personally, but to support the emergence of a radical, forward-moving imaginary and build resistance against pervasive standardization and commercialization.

Since the early 20th century—and especially since the late 1960s—politically engaged art has been a pillar of the speculative and, at times, political protest. This situation changed in the 1990s when artists left their studios and situated their projects in the social space, opening them to collaboration and participation. With their participatory approach in *Common Grounds* and their artistic practice in general, Irena Eden and Stijn Lernout pursue a reshaping of the traditional aesthetic relationship between artist, work, and audience, allowing others to contribute and intervene in reality. They see themselves as artists in the role of those who initiate, enable, support, but also explore, map, and observe situations. Their works are fragmentary or discontinuous projects that emerge through travels, explorations of terrain, and collaborations that may span longer or shorter periods but are, in their spatial arrangement—aside from publications—ephemeral, as they are the punctual result of the convergence of various forces and agencies in a given context. The audience no longer merely observes but contributes to the creation or, a posteriori, becomes readers. Participation not only dissolves the classical situation of reception but also dismantles structural aesthetic categories like autonomy, non-interference, and artistic distance.

The participatory art practiced by the duo seeks to reinvent new forms of togetherness and community as an assembly of individual personalities, resulting from collaboration between artists and participants, not pre-existing it. It is not based on conventional criteria of identity or cultural belonging but on forms of inclusion of particularity, situations, and chance. The work *Common Grounds* represents both an artistic and a political approach—political because it proposes a specific, temporary structure of the collective and because it engages in politics differently, as participation is a catalyst for forming independent organizational models (10).

Self-organization is one of the touchstones of practical and theoretical approaches in the realm of the commons, however diverse they may be. The commons encompass both material and immaterial resources, experiences, emotions, and affects, as well as new organizational forms that offer alternatives to the regulatory mechanisms of private property, market economy, or nation-states. They have a long history but emerged prominently a few decades ago as a counterstrategy to systems of individualization and neoliberalization. Through new forms of self-organization, self-governance, and collaboration with the world and its life forms, they became an

instrument in the fight against political and economic plunder. Rather than mourning (nearly) lost commons and a supposedly “natural” and “original” connection between people, spaces, and resources destroyed by the movement of enclosures and appropriation, the Common Grounds project modestly focuses on various temporally limited forms and scales of shared experience, generating a sense of togetherness. These approaches include overtly political attempts to redefine the commons and future shared challenges or to inhabit spaces. They also form the basis for shared experiences that lead to conviviality in the etymological sense of “joining together.” Such experiences include eating together, watching films, listening to music, or sharing traumas, suffering, or emotions that evoke compassion in the truest sense of “feeling with someone”—within interventions that address stress, resilience, fear, and vulnerability (13; 9; 14). These practices of shared experience contribute to identification and the emergence of a shared meaning while simultaneously transforming common values and giving rise to specific spatial and social relationships. The shared use of spaces, goods, time, and knowledge leads to new forms of taking responsibility as citizens, alternative ways of living, and even designs for (counter-)power.

Common Grounds undoubtedly created critical awareness and perhaps also sparked a desire to collectively build future worlds. More importantly, it enabled the exchange of ideas and experiences and created the conditions for people to engage, at least temporarily, with their shared concerns and desires. The project neither fills a gap in representation nor forms an organization—it explicitly and consciously avoids being critical agitation, situating itself instead in the moment of collectively forming common grounds, in the moment of recognizing differences as differences.

“We are not the same, and that is wonderful; we are like constellations.

The fact that we share spaces, that we travel together, does not mean we are the same; it means, however, that we are more likely to be drawn to each other by our differences than by the fact of a status of shared belonging to this idea of humanity.”

— Ailton Krenak, *Ideas to Postpone the End of the World*, 2019 (2)

“The common world must be built, it’s as simple as that. It is not already there, hidden somewhere in nature, in a universalism, concealed under the crumpled veils of ideologies and beliefs that one supposedly only needs to push aside to reach agreement. It must be worked on, created, and anchored.”

— Bruno Latour, *Multitudes* 45, no. 2 (2011): 38–41 (16)

“We must today nurture the hope for a shared life, whose cornerstones we have yet to invent, but whose richness we can already recognize. Social cooperation, the circulation of knowledge, the sharing of resources, the productivity of interconnected intelligence—in short, everything that is the opposite of bare life itself: a politically and socially valuable life, the invention of ourselves and others, the invention of ourselves through others—this is something that can be realized everywhere. It is only a matter of deciding who will govern the enormous amount of value we collectively produce and what future institutions will look like. Perhaps in the form of a Pascalian wager: a wager on a new universality that must be fully constructed, a wager on a politics of the commonality of all that is also an ethics of differences.”

— Judith Revel, *Construire le commune. Une ontologie*, 2011 (17)

- [1] Walt Whitman, *Leaves of Grass*, 1891–1892.
- [2] Ailton Krenak, *Ideas to Postpone the End of the World* (São Paulo: Companhia das Letras, 2019), trans. Anthony Doyle (Toronto: House of Anansi Press, 2020).
- [3] Silvia Federici, *Re-enchanting the World: Feminism and the Politics of the Commons* (Oakland: Kairos / PM Press, 2018).
- [4] Ivan Illich, *Tools for Conviviality* (New York: Harper and Row, 1973).
- [5] SOLIDARITY: “Urban Undercommons and the Struggle for Transversal Connections,” Niki Kubaczek, Hernals (17th District).
- [6] SPACE | LIVING: “When the Living Room Becomes an Office,” Simon Andreas Güntner in conversation with Christiane Feuerstein, Simmering (11th District).
- [7] COOPERATION: “Homo urbanus—The Urban Human,” Elisabeth Oberzaucher, Floridsdorf (21st District).
- [8] CLOSENESS: “Inner Landscape, Processes of Narration and Memory,” with a screening of the film *First Landscape* # Mirka, Miriam Bajtala, Donaustadt (22nd District).
- [9] FEAR: “(++Advanced Plus++),” Hanna Binder, Liesing (23rd District).
- [10] As exemplified by British artist Jeremy Deller, who describes his practice as initiating social situations through participatory public art. See, e.g., Deller’s projects like *We’re Here Because We’re Here* or interviews in *Art Review*.
- [11] In the sense of the English verb “populate”, implying active habitation or creation of shared spaces.
- [12] BEING ON THE MOVE: “The Conquest of the City,” sound performance by Collective Weiter (Alexandra Pâzgu, Florian Kmet, and Roman Blumenschein), Penzing (14th District).
- [13] CHANGE: “Stress as a Means of Adaptation,” Virginie Canoine, Döbling (19th District).
- [14] FRAGILITY: “Transpositions,” Iris Dittler, Hietzing (13th District).
- [15] Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991).
- [16] Bruno Latour, “There Is No Common World: It Must Be Composed,” *Multitudes* 45, no. 2 (2011): 38–41.
- [17] Judith Revel, *Construire le commun. Une onthologie, transversal* 08/2011: inventions. <http://transversal.at/transversal/0811/revel/fr>