

# **Introduction Between the Individual and the Common**

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*Community Art* is part of a series of books made by the research group Arts in Society (at the Netherlands-based Fontys College for the Arts), which examines the relation between societal transformations and artistic creation. In our previous publications, *The Murmuring of the Artistic Multitude* (Gielen 2009) and *Being an Artist in Post-Fordist Times* (Gielen and De Bruyne eds. 2009), we explored the contemporary art scene in relation to the parallel development of the new capitalist economy and neoliberal politics. During the course of a number of book launches, we noticed that, perhaps surprisingly, many artists and art mediators (especially younger ones), largely accepted the description of our modern society and art world as ‘post-Fordist’. By this, we mean a working environment ruled by economic flexibility, mental and physical mobility, project work, informality and ‘adaptivity’, such as that whipped up by the creative and cultural industries. Some of the people we spoke to felt quite oppressed by this situation; others even spoke of a ‘totalitarian regime’ and, in that context, we were asked about possible ways out of this impasse. Is there still a place for subversion, or are there other art practices that can elude the *dispositif* of post-Fordism? This book is a response to these frequently asked questions. We wondered whether the recent worldwide boom in community art might be part of the answer. By offering theoretical viewpoints, historical and geographical contextualization and artists’ testimonies, this book provides an overview of, and insight into, contemporary community art practice and context. In attempting this, however, we are explicitly disinterested in mounting a defence of, or offensive against, community art. In the first place, we wanted to make resources accessible which allow community art (and thus art in general) to be understood in its societal context.

The social artistic ‘genre’ — with its roots in the 1920s and 1930s (Proletarian Art and New Deal Art) and the 1960s and 1970s (countercultural art) — became dormant in the 1980s and 1990s only to be revived strongly over the past decade. Even artists who enjoy a lot of recognition in official art circles have begun to demonstrate considerably more interest in the community around them. This results in a colourful artistic palette, encompassing relational aesthetics, new social commitment and radical political art.

*Community Art* attempts to explain this third upsurge in artistic concern for society. The various essays and interviews included here are not restricted to attempts to explain this revival;

they also offer critical reflection, posing such questions as: does the new generation of committed artists really possess the same sincerity and naivety as the previous ones or are we now dealing with a smarter, more strategic, but perhaps also more opportunistic, specimen? Is the revival of community art merely a perverted side effect of ongoing neoliberalization and the dismantling of the welfare state, or does the community now offer a powerful alternative to hyper-individualization and endless flexibility? Will art always remain a fiction, or can it, in fact, generate societal change?

In keeping with the logic of the series of books, *Arts in Society*, this publication assembles a variety of artists, sociologists, cultural critics and philosophers. Following on from *Being an Artist in Post-Fordist Times*, we confront dominant concepts by offering the insights of a number of thinkers who, in our eyes, have shifted or broadened discourse in relation to the subject at hand. While Paolo Virno and Michael Hardt fulfilled this function in *Being an Artist...*, it is Carol Martin, Antonio Negri, Richard Schechner and Zhang Changcheng who assume the role in this book.

### Common

In 2009, the Italian philosopher, Antonio Negri, published the book *Commonwealth* which he co-authored with the American literary scientist Michael Hardt. This book concludes a trilogy, begun with *Empire* and *Multitude*, of radical political philosophy that attempts to reinvigorate communism. Ideology aside, both supporters and detractors of Negri and Hardt acknowledge the importance of their critical analyses of global capitalism and neoliberalism. Whether or not the solutions and strategies they propose make sense remains open for debate. What is important here, however, is the way in which Negri and Hardt breathed life into forgotten, supplanted and sometimes denounced concepts to offer different ways of looking at the world. Obsolete notions such as ‘multitude’, ‘general intellect’, ‘bio-power’ and also ‘love’ are re-actualized and refined for up-to-date societal analysis.

For our book, the concept of ‘common’ is of essential relevance; in *Being an Artist in Post-Fordist Times*, Michael Hardt explains that this notion is already centuries old. When, in the sixteenth and seventeenth century, first in England and then all over Europe, the meadows, where animals grazed, and the forests, where everyone could gather wood, were privatized, the conflict about common ground was born. From the Christian side came the argument that

God had given the earth and its beauty to all of humankind and that it should, therefore, be used in common.

Since the 1980s, the battle over the common has re-emerged, in a new guise and without transcendental allure, in a bid to oppose the advancing neoliberalization of government, which seeks to contract out national resources — such as water, soil and oil — to private enterprise. Some say that the state has conducted a full-scale clearance sale over the past thirty years, thus forfeiting its political grip on society. In cyber culture, a similar debate over ‘information commons’, ‘creative’ and ‘cultural commons’ has been going on for almost a decade. With these examples in mind, Hardt and Negri argue that the common is not limited to natural resources, but that man continually contributes to the production of language, knowledge, codes, information, emotion, affect, etc., which exist solely by virtue of social interactions and are easily shared. Forms of expression, creativity and art would lose their potency and dynamics if they could no longer draw on that common. Therefore, Hardt and Negri fervently resist the privatization of cultural products such as information, ideas and species of animals and plants. For them, open access to the natural and cultural common, the life source of community, is a prerequisite for a free and egalitarian society. By contrast, our times increasingly seem to deny that open access to the common.

As an antidote to the general trend, initiatives like community art — which, defined very broadly, thrives on the creation of affection and the nurturing of a practice of community between sponsor, artist, artwork and public — has an affiliation with the common. This approach stands diametrically opposed to the equally strong desire for the individualization of artistry in modern times, especially in the arts influenced by the avant-garde movement. Any community art project is catapulted back and forth between the poles of the common and the individual, and any theory about community art that doesn’t take this observation as its starting point is doomed not to understand the complexity of the dynamics involved.

### The Individual as Protagonist

Since the modernist era, the professional art world has thrived on such myths as individual creative genius, which deny or supplant the importance of a common. In their classic study, *Canvases and Careers* (1965), Harrison and Cynthia White implicitly demon-

strate the source of this individualization. Their study predictably begins with the rupture of the academic visual arts system and proceeds to outline some important shifts in the conception of the artist. When, due to morphological pressure, the Académie des Peinture et Sculpture in Paris and the annual Salon began to fall apart, it signified the birth of what the Whites refer to as the ‘dealer-critic’ system. In this system, not only does the immaterial principle of language play an important role — with the emergence of art criticism — but the role of the artist also undergoes a profound change, with personal style becoming more important than conforming to a uniform system of rules. While the long-awaited masterpiece no longer mattered, what was needed was a coherent oeuvre that guaranteed the lasting reputation of the artist. In other words, when the Académie lost its monopoly, one no longer bet on masterpieces, but the pedigree of the artist became prominent. Or, as the title of White and White’s study clearly underscores, in a post-academic art system, the focus is less on the canvas and more on the career of the artist. Behind this shift, however, lurks simple market logic as the potential buyer needs to be convinced of the quality of the work of art; the most important arguments dealers use nowadays are, on the one hand, the aforementioned critiques of the work and, on the other, the positive perception of previous works. In other words, within an artist’s oeuvre, already-delivered quality functions as a promise of future quality. This kind of mechanism may be read as the ‘retro-prospective’ character of an artistic career. Our contemporary understanding of the individual artist, their authorship and oeuvre, is as much a product of democratization as of the marketing of the art world, which got off to a flying start in the nineteenth century.

Indeed, when craftsmanship and academic rules disappeared as the hallmark of art, only the maker remained as binding agent and reliable point of reference. In other words, only the signature, which connects a work to an individual artist, determines the market value of a work of art. It is, perhaps, no coincidence that liberalism, with its strong belief in the beneficence of the market, embraces the individual as protagonist. Moreover, from an historical perspective, the development of liberal ideology and the invention of the artist as individual run remarkably parallel to one another. In short, the myth of the individual artist is a product of the mental space of free market capitalism, with works and signature often functioning as a brand.

While White and White illustrate their argument with examples from the visual arts, we can observe the same phenomenon in other artistic disciplines, where individualization is often even more evident as group processes and creations are traced back and attributed to individual authors. So, although dance companies, theatre groups and orchestras are collectives, attention is drawn to a single creator, who then ranks most highly in the symbolic hierarchy. This ‘authorizing’ of collective creative processes reduces them to the (genius) work of an individual, despite a more generalized acceptance that new creations imply shared responsibility and thus a common achievement.

From the tendency towards individualization outlined here, it follows that, within the modern (and Western) concept of art and the artist, the notion of community art constitutes a contradiction in terms. The demand for singularity on the part of the artist is hard to reconcile with social consciousness and the commitment to a community. This is perhaps one of the reasons why part of the professional art world still struggles to accept community art as a positive development. In return, community workers in all forms and formats have trouble accepting the arts as a possible means for creating the common.

### The Power of Trespassing

Returning to the questions posed by young artists at the launch events for *Being an Artist...*, our answers in relation to community art can only ever be tentative and partial. There is no prevailing way out of the contradictions that the post-Fordist context imposes on the art world. Neither is there a way out of the tension between the will and desire to strive for an (artistic) common and the deeply rooted exigencies of the autonomy of contemporary art. Every community art project needs to be evaluated in relation to its concrete environment and its potentially therapeutic, subversive, critical, aesthetic or political impact. However, the readers of *Being an Artist...* ensured that questions regarding the activist and revelatory potential of the arts in general and community art in particular, are continuously present in this book.

The paradoxical position of community art is a leitmotif within this book. On the one hand, various articles and testimonies point towards the potency of art in influencing a community or, at least, allowing it to view itself in a different way. For example, different forms of community art reclaim the streets, in

the broadest sense of the term, salvaging a public and democratic space, sometimes even literally laying claim to a ‘common’. Other artistic projects direct our attention to the loss of common space and make the effects of this loss felt, sometimes personally. Whenever art leaves its own individualistic boundaries and trespasses into the forbidden terrain of community bonding, it becomes de facto politics.

On the other hand, some contributions, from the artistic as well as from the societal perspective, testify to considerable distrust. That there are governmental authorities willing to support a dose of subversion (albeit in a controllable way) casts suspicion over any kind of subsidized artistic activism. That ‘community art for sale’ is particularly pre-eminent in neoliberal regimes raises further questions about whose politics community art is serving. Living in post-Fordist times might imply that the correct political thing to do for the arts is to celebrate its autonomy and retreat into an artistic exile, which (just like its counterpart) is increasingly becoming forbidden terrain because it is anti-social in tendency.

By bringing both ways of trespassing together in this book (and, of course, the shades of grey in between), we attempt to create a nuanced image of the phenomenon. This image can never be objective, but it will take shape precisely because of the many subjective positions and interpretations that constitute it.

### Four Parts and an Epilogue

*Community Art* is divided into four sections. In the first part, ‘Definitions’, we undertake a number of attempts to define the concept of community art beyond the rather unrevealing supposition that community art has something to do with searching in and through the arts for the creation of a community based on place, interest or curiosity.

In ‘Mapping Community Art’, Pascal Gielen develops, amongst other things, a cartography of community art through which concrete projects can be mapped, in terms of their subversive or digestive nature or in terms of the orientation of participating artists towards individualism or towards other people. The result is a compass rose which enables the full diversity of possible community art projects to be visualized in a single image. This serves as a prelude to Gielen’s extensive consideration of the subversive possibilities of various practices.

In ‘Community Art as a Contested Artistic Practice’, Paul

De Bruyne analyzes one of the longest-running community art projects in Europe, the Brussels-based multicultural music production organization, MET-X, in an attempt to define community art as a constellation of positions on a scale of diverse dynamics in the process of producing, distributing and consuming artworks. He concludes that community art cannot be regarded as an artistic genre nor can it be understood from the perspective of only one actor involved in the construction of a network. Rather, the concepts of 'community' and 'art' can only be understood in the context of specific projects.

In 'Community Art is What We Say and Write it is', An De bisschop defines community art as a discourse that is being developed by, amongst others, the government and the press. She compares the policy and press discourses in the community art contexts of the Western Cape (South Africa) and Flanders (Belgium), outlining disparate interpretative frameworks and discovering similarities and differences between the situation in the West and that in South Africa.

Concluding this section, Quirijn Lennert van den Hoogen and Hans van Maanen define community art from the starting point of the specific values that can make art (in general) effective in society. To this theoretical analysis, they add a description of an intriguing community art project in Groningen (The Netherlands).

In the second part of the book, 'The Artist's Voice', several artists join the debate by drawing on their own projects and experiences. In their own words, they prove that 'believers' in community art are not naive puppets who think that their work will save the world. As it turns out, artists are capable of critically evaluating their own practice, both defending it and acknowledging its limitations. The Belgian director, Bart Van Nuffelen, describes how his group leaves the safety of the rehearsal room and takes the step towards a specific public square with its defeated and addicted residents. It is there that their work affects the social fabric, making people become more articulate and leading to new insights on the part of the artists, which publicly exposes the reality of the square. Alida Neslo, from Surinam, describes her artistic and educational development, which has led her to a youth prison in Paramaribo where she is developing a project with imprisoned children.

A completely different point of view is offered by the American choreographer, Lionel Popkin, who regards artists themselves

as a community that has to be created, which is partly a response to the new distribution circumstances in the US, where the free market is more dominant than ever. The Brazilian visual artist, Ricky Seabra, situates his activist projects within the framework of developments in visual art to ask the core question: under which circumstances can art and activism be combined? Bertus Borger, artistic director of the Dutch Fontys Rockacademy, describes how his rock institute contributes to restoring peace in the war-torn Serbian/Albanian city of Mitrovica.

The third part of the book, 'Rethinking Basic Concepts', provides room for a more conceptual discussion on the basic terms that frame community art: what is art? In which political-economic-cultural constellation do we live and how do art and the social relate to each other? In an interview by Pascal Gielen and Sonja Lavaert, Antonio Negri addresses the nature of art, of capitalist society since the 1970s and of the relationship between labour and art, the art market and the common in an attempt to elaborate the potency of art as a tool of resistance. This conversation with the critical (but marginalized) communist is followed by an interview with the Chinese Communist Party member, Zhang Changcheng, grandson of one of the leaders of Mao's Long March and one of the most influential forces behind the renewal of art policy in China. In conversation with Alison Friedman, Zhang describes the ways in which arts policy and thinking around art have evolved from Mao until now. Expressing ideas infused with the spirit of Confucius, the concepts of critical art, communism and politics are interpreted from a Chinese perspective.

A final interview, with Richard Schechner and Carol Martin, completes this section. This conversation, conducted by Karel Vanhaesebrouck and Klaas Tindemans, once again plunges us deep into the history of the Western avant-garde and the relationship between art, economics and politics over the past half-century.

In the fourth part of this book, 'Public Sphere and Activism', a number of community art projects are analyzed in relation to their subversive power in public space. In 'From Community Art to Communal Art', Paul De Bruyne analyzes various forms of art that consolidate or contest the prevalent definitions and practices of public space. Between a conformist and a revolutionary attitude towards the public space, a 'third way' is introduced. From

the contribution of Hein Schoer, about art in societies that have preserved a part of their pre-modern roots, it becomes clear that community art could only arise once the idea of community had largely been lost in modernity. From this moment on, art becomes not only an agent for social integration and cultural stabilization, but also a factor within disorientation. Only then could it be charged with the artistic (and ethical) duty for change, renewal and being different. As the 'natural' tie to community was lost, it had to be reconstructed.

As an example of this process at work, Luigi Coppola takes the artist, Michelangelo Pistoletto, whose practice has attempted to create a communal situation over several decades. Meanwhile, the Dutch visual artist, Jonas Staal, points in his work and his essay to the everyday certainties that we take for granted, such as freedom and democracy, especially in public space. In considering that freedom takes shape within strict conditions and that democracy is not a natural state but merely an ideology that is maintained by force, Staal discusses the idea of 'democratism' as a prelude to pointing towards an ever-changing possible reality. In considering how video-makers in Indonesia can only work in relation to the dominant characteristics of their televisual landscape, Miguel Escobar Varela argues that artistic and activist expressions of the margin are always determined by the dominant forms in relation to which they are marginalized. In the final contribution to this section, Tessa Overbeek introduces and interviews Tilde Björfors, the founding mother of the contemporary Swedish circus movement. This encounter describes the practice of circus as a critique of the dominant values of the Swedish political and cultural mentality (moderation, modesty and the avoidance of risk).

*Community Art* concludes with an epilogue that goes against the grain, taken from the diaries of the visual artist, Jan Fabre, which demonstrates that artistic self-creation can be understood as a political act. 'The Revolution in My Own Flesh' might be considered to be diametrically opposed to community art, but, in our view, it isn't. Every specific artistic and socio-economic situation demands from the artist an attitude of truth towards himself, his art and the relevant community. Sometimes, as is the case for Fabre, self-revolution is on the agenda; at other times, bonding and commonality are at stake. Each situation asks for an answer to the question of how community and art should relate to each other, there and then.

There are no universal answers.

We trust that the four parts of this book combine to stimulate discussion on the role of the arts *in* a globalizing society beyond easy glorification or revulsion. Anyone who wishes to comment on the book and the issues raised in it are welcome to do so through the different channels that are listed at the end. The research group will take up the thoughts and critique of the readers in its next projects. Let's inspire each other.