

Art and the Modeling of a Commons

It is incredible to be writing this talk devoted to commoning on the day after the Supreme Court's ruling in favor of corporate capitalism's rights to advance unlimited campaign funding. It makes the title of this presentation all the more ironic because it is the absolute wrong direction for the United States. As Stephen Colbert says wittily, "Corporations are people too." And it is as if the laws of the commons have been turned upside down. Especially when actual people are denied the right of habeas corpus—a right which originates with the Magna Carta—via the policies of Bush and now Obama. How to mark this occasion? How to reverse this terrible destiny with which we are complicit as US citizens?

In this talk I am going to address art and poetry because art and poetry provide us with tools, I believe, for talking about commoning. Personally, for me, they mediate what a commons is. Art and poetry are not removed from our experience (though there are countless ways that art in particular is alienated from us through its becoming commodity), but what gives shape to our lives. How can art and poetry provide us with tools for addressing, rethinking, and transforming commons?

Some weeks ago I was meeting with a visual artist to start sketching out an interview we are planning to do later this spring. The artist—someone very interested in contemporary poetry—lamented that the art world (or at least his corner of it) was not like the poetry world (or at least the corner of it I consider myself to be part of). In terms of poetry, we both agreed that poetry's lack of commodity value often makes poets more likely to work with one another and to make work out of sites of community. Whereas art tends to exist through commodity (whether at the level of museum or gallery or biennial/festival) poetry exists through gift/courtesy. Rosmarie Waldrop has a wonderful essay about poetry and gift economy which I have taught for the past three summers at Bard College, "Alarums and Excursions." In that essay she is saying something similar to what I want to say here. That in the small press, small magazine, reading series, list serve, blog, and even workshop exist structures that could be usefully applied to other cultural locations. Something I often wonder is what would happen if poets outsourced their skills and labor power to other cultural locations (a topic I address in an essay about to come out in Kristen Gallagher's and Tim Shaner's WIG vol. 2). The point is, how to think about poetry as a kind of marsh for larger social responsibilities and personal conduct? How to use the experimental, sub- and extra- institutional environments of poetry to model commons elsewhere? What would happen if such models were taken up by other culture workers and applied faithfully?

On the other hand, I think poets are well served by paying attention to conversations and discourses outside their field. Art is one such field where I think poets have a lot to benefit from, and this beneficial relationship between art and poetry has obviously been proven in the history of poetry, especially in the 20th century. So I'm going to try to think the commons through art and poetry interchangeably here, even though I realize art and poetry are not on an equal footing culturally, and certainly not economically.

Attending the Performa 07 and 09 live art biennials, I have noticed two emergent forms for art: reenactment and the parade. Seeing Arto Lindsay's art parade in Times Square during this past Performa, the parade reminded me of the importance of bodies coming together in actual space. Does the art parade not express a desideratum for collective action, demonstration, and protest? Following the parade as it danced/marched down 7th avenue, one could not help but witness and interact with countless side events and attractions. While the parade itself was rather bland—consisting of a line of about fifty marchers in tan trench coats—witnessing random passersby interact with the marchers was not. If art expresses a desideratum for being together eventually, how to reappropriate art's appropriation of the parade for communing? Occupying space, and witnessing the fruits of being with numerous others in space, one observes what develops, what becomes, from bodies being in space in semi-organized ways. Art is good at organizing things in this way. It is a means of organization—so why not use it more to this end? If the legacy of live art instructs us about one thing, it is the radicality of live interaction. Despite many problems that I have with Performa as an organization, one of its great contributions to recent art discourse is to make evident the radicality of bodies being together through participatory, live interaction.

How to bring bodies together? How to recognize conditions of possibility in the way we are already together? While it is essential to use the spaces we have to create events in which people can be in common, the preservation of our ability to common is absolutely essential too. What would live art had been without the struggles of Civil Rights activists in the 60s and 70s. The development of live art, I would argue, would not have occurred the way it did without the inspiration of Civil Rights actions, and the sharing of resources between artists and activists. Another art work featured in the 09 Performa biennial was Anne Collod's "replay" of Anna Halprin's *Parades and Changes*. This beautiful historical reconstruction of Halprin's original performance reminded me of another work by Halprin, in many ways far more radical. *City Dance*, by Halprin, features continuous dance performances throughout San Francisco and other cities. The idea of the piece, anticipating the strategies of the Critical Mass bicyclists and other contemporary activists, organizes dancers in such a way that their performances will be continuous in public

spaces without violating laws of public assembly (thus obviating the need for permits). Artists and poets increasingly need to work with lawyers to challenge laws of gathering, land use, and public speech in order to draw attention to the erosion of Civil Rights in the US and elsewhere, if not to teach about the law, which for too many citizens is above their comprehension rather than part of their popular imagination. How to teach the law through live art? How to demonstrate within the limits of the law and push the law when necessary? While the eventual nature of all assembly is important and the gathering of bodies key, so is a framing of events dynamics through questions and problems of the law.

If I take anything away from Peter Linebaugh's brilliant book on the history of The Magna Carta and accompanying Charter of the Forest, *The Magna Carta Manifesto*, it is that commons must be struggled for both within the realm of culture and within the realm of the law. While the Magna Carta is currently eroded by violations of Habeas Corpus, the Charter of the Forest's demand for usufruct—the lawful enjoyment and use of the land by all—is threatened by land expropriation practices which began in the 15th century and continue ubiquitously to this day. These practices, which created an urban proletariat for the first time in history, happened through the deliberate efforts of proto-capitalists to erode feudal law and grant new powers to landlords over feudal lords. At the beginnings of our modernism are the seeds of two global crises which have nearly played out their course: ecological unsustainability and the expropriation of labor. The two crises happen together, they go hand in hand, and are accompanied by women's oppression and race-based oppression, as Linebaugh's excellent work has also traced.

Two art movements that may provide tools for thinking anti-expropriation and ecological sustainability in tandem are those which follow the "Land" and "Earthworks" artists of the 60s, 70s, and 80s; they are also those which follow after Mierle Ukeles's notion of Maintenance art, a notion of art mirrored by some land art practices. Building on Ukeles's performances in which she engages social service providers such as garbage men, more than ever there is a need to draw attention to service as part of a social infrastructure. The problem is one of looking at function, and presencing ways that social functions are withdrawn from us—from our knowledge and attention. If art can often do nothing else, it can frame our attention in concise and certain ways. Maintenance art does precisely that; it attends how things work, and shows how art is complicit within social processes and practices. Likewise, it shows how art can be used to make things work differently. A great example of Maintenance art is Robert Smithson's "mud extraction sculpture," which he proposed to build out of a clogged drainage pipe in Manhattan's Central Park. What if the "art work" became the act of moving the mud elsewhere? The

drained mud would become sculpture; the sculpture would be what remains from a maintenance process—a process which serves the upkeep of a commonly shared space, namely Central Park. Such projects abound at the Center for Urban Pedagogy, a New York City based education and arts organization I can't recommend to you enough.

Maintenance art, in the best possible way, is consciousness raising as well as practical in the ways it proposes to shape (or sculpt) a commons. The legacy of Land art is also instructional for how it teaches one to be critical of land use practices and unsustainable economies. Take Agnes Denes' Wheatfield, for instance. Through Wheatfield—a veritable work of Maintenance art—Denes raised 5000 lbs of wheat upon a blighted urban space, namely a landfill at Manhattan's Battery Park. Yet, through the site-specificity of her project, Denes was also able to presence an aporia surrounding Wheatfield, which has to do with the value of real estate vs. the value of commons.

How, after raising a landscape from its blighted state, could the wheatfield possibly be bought? How could it be sold as property in New York's downtown real estate market? For those who watched the work of art come into being (that is, the wheat grow on waste land) the thought was unthinkable and participants cried when the land was bought. Following Denes, and the artist Gordon Matta-Clark, who, in his work "Fake Estates," bought up odd properties in Queens, documenting their purchase and noting their location, how to draw out the false equivalences between land use (the use value of land) and its exchange value (the value placed on land as property/commodity)? In the case of Amy Balkin's work, how to draw out the aporias of land use, and the rights of element—rights to clean air, clean water, clean earth. If the atmosphere (and other elements essential to human survival) is one of the last frontiers of expropriation, how to site the aporias of global liberal pluralism and ecological sustainability (of which there are of course many). Balkin's solutions in her Public Smog project are two-fold: the first involves buying up tradable smog credits to make a public park in the atmosphere, which parodies the logic of "cap and trade" in order to critique it; the second, proposes that the atmosphere be made an International preservation site. By wading through United Nations bureaucracy to make her proposal, Balkin proposes that which would throw our senses of international law completely out of wack, imposing an international law on the extra-national law of corporations. The enforcement of such a preservation act would obviously have a devastating effect on how corporations behave, and would raise the much needed specter of climate reparations—a specter the earthquakes in Haiti have provided us our most tragic reminder of so far.

There is so much else to say. But I wanted to end with just a few thoughts about information expropriation. If elemental expropriation—expropriation of a free people's

rights to element—presents one front of the battle against expropriation, another is obviously in the realm of information. What does it mean for art to intervene in this realm? One example I'll provide (though I suspect there are countless others at digital communities such as Rhizome and Eyebeam), is the work of Cory Arcangel. As in *Maintenance art*, Arcangel's work often focuses on simple digital technologies in order to reveal how they are made and partake of processes. As such, he is a poet, someone concerned with craft or making. The built worlds he dismantles are video games, as well as archaic video and design software. In college, I will never forget Arcangel teaching a live audience how to hack into an obsolete Apple software called LISA. The demonstration was simple and elegant. It appeared that any one could do this. By simply going "into" the software code and switching a binary switch to the "off" position, Arcangel enabled the software to be copied.

In a recent work, *Born to Run Addenda*, Arcangel adds glockenspiel to the tracks of Bruce Springstein's *Born to Run*, and makes these tracks into MP3 files which now travel, replicating themselves, around the internet. While many view Arcangel's work in the tradition of the artist's joke, I think this assessment of his work neglects the fact that many of his works can potentially provide us with tools to analyze how information functions as property, that is, ways that it is expropriable and ways to counter its expropriation. And that's where the educational component of Arcangel's work comes in. Teaching around these experiments and demonstrations of his. Talking explicitly about how he did what he did. Disseminating knowledge. How, Arcangel's work begs, to use art as a tool of analysis as well as aporia? If the information age represents a new era of primitive accumulation, how may artists along with software programmers, coders, and hardware engineers teach civil disobedience in preservation of a digital commons? How, what's more, can struggles for digital and elemental commons happen in tandem?