

To Realize the Commons

Rick Dolphijn

Essay – March 4, 2016

In this contribution to the *Common Conflict* [onlineopen.org/common-conflict/] virtual roundtable, Rick Dolphijn emphasizes that the commons is not a humanist concept but much more a materialist concept. He argues that the commons depends upon the creation of new assemblages: it is the accidental process of realizing a mental, a social and an environmental whole that marks the commons.

Obviously the idea of the commons is old, yet I fear that its contemporary use is still much dependent upon what we could call a '68 legacy. With that I am not only referring to the impact of the student uproar in Paris, the race riots in the United States, or the strikes and revolts that took place in many more locations around the globe where the political landscape was in a process of change. More, I am referring to how this resulted in the countless emancipatory movements that in their togetherness not only questioned the way in which race, class and gender oppositions structured the post-war world, but also to how all these micropolitical actions turned '68 into 'an event' that not so much 'took place,' but that has been dominating critical thinking ever since. Personally I am highly indebted to the ideas this amazing global event still has to offer us. Yet I think that when it comes to thinking the commons today, we should start by identifying the ideas delivered to us by '68 that *do not* match the contemporary simply because the world has changed a lot over the past fifty years. Or to put it even more strongly, let us start by isolating those '68 ideas / ideals that *prevent* us from thinking (and realizing) the commons in the twenty-first century:

1. There Is No 'Generation' in Charge of the Commons

In contrast to popular post-'68 idealism, thinking and realizing the commons does not depend upon 'a generation' (as in, a new generation has to step up and fight the power). The idea that our social bonds do not so much depend on kinship relations or on socio-economic classes, but rather on the *generation* with which one shares a childhood, is very much a baby boomer reality. In fact, I think that it was *only* with this post-war generation that came to adulthood in the late 1960s, that a kind of generational communality could have been realized. The unique cocktail of post-war frustration (dealing with the ongoing strategies of fascism and communism), (post)colonial politics, the invention of pop music, the remarkable growth of the economy, the demographic power shift, I think led to the rise of the *only* 'generation' in the course of history. The idea that this generation was preceded by particular generations and that new generations followed (which were given silly names such as 'generation X') *is a myth*. Thinking the commons in 2016 should therefore not be relying on *any* idea of a generation, or on any kind of communality that implicitly depends upon intra-generational bonds. Times have changed.

2. The 'Commons' Is Not a Humanist Concept

In line with its implicit 'generational' ideal, the commons, and even more the communist ideals it is to entail, consider the social relations that give form to it, as necessarily *human* relations. As if communism concerns 'the sovereignty of the people.' I take this as a strange pseudo-Marxism that again became widely popular after '68 but that is most of all supported by nineteenth-century humanist ideals (post-Cartesian, post-Kantian) that have (still) survived the critique of this humanism up to today. Any historian and any amateur cartographer (reading a pre-nineteenth-century city map) will tell you that the commons is much more a *materialist* concept that always traverses the mental, the social and the environmental. Communalism has always been first and foremost a space *in which* humans, non-humans, and in the end all possible organic and non-organic forms of life, peacefully coexist. The sympathy, the empathy or the affect through which any kind of communalism is being realized, then, has never 'taken place' between people exclusively, but involves every possible body, every possible entity that is somehow caught up in this event. The commons, the markets, the free havens, the *margins of society* where free thinking could take place, have been crucial to human settlement forever. But also beyond the realm of humanity the great *in-between* [the infinite (non-Euclidian) space that threads measured space] produces the fresh air that is the *only* means of survival for space-under-control. Ergo, since the commons is in no way limited to human relations, there is no reason to believe that the realization of the commons is in any way dependent upon 'humans' as a species.

3. To Realize the Commons One Should Not Open Up to the Other

In social theory, the need to embrace 'the Other' has been important to the thinking of the left since '68. This 'reaching out for' otherness played a crucial role in the emancipatory processes that defined critical thinking since then (the theories concerning race, class and gender for instance) but it is also essential to 'new' fields like animal studies and post-human studies (where thinking of nature is often pursued in terms of 'otherness'). The problem, however, is the humanism, or better, the anthropocentrism at the core of our thinking, which produces an otherness *only* and *necessarily* as a projection of the self from which it starts. Otherness is the possible world that we can think of, but one wonders how much this image that we ourselves produce (of blackness, the proletariat, the woman) is anything but an idea of the white middle-class male from which this idea arises. In other words, isn't otherness in the end a very passive and even reactionary humanist ideal that 'fakes reality' and even resists the present from happening? Instead of opening oneself up to the Other (as a violent gesture), wouldn't it make much more sense to *let oneself be opened by an-otherness* (the wholly unexpected, the unforeseen, the necessarily inhuman alternative)? This kind of vulnerability, this restraint from any judgement, this unwillingness to take position, is then precisely the kind of *immanent responsibility* necessary for any kind of communalism to come into existence.

So what is the kind of communalism we are left with? How can we become aware of this non-generational, post-human and responsible communalism in our day and age?

Crucial here is that *the commons has to be created*. Like any kind of cooperation, any parallel existence, any coexistence, the commons depends upon the creation of new assemblages. As I noted before, this starts from realizing a kind of vulnerability, not so much a movement toward the Other but an allowing of 'an-otherness' to happen. Only this way can new alliances come into being.

Let us listen therefore to Francis Bacon, the painter, who has often talked about this process of opening up to unforeseen powers, when being asked how creative processes lead to great art. This has nothing to do with 'having an idea' that needs to be realized (by

an artist, living in a particular era) on the canvas. For Bacon, the creation of an artwork was by all means a post-human enterprise. Of course, being the artist, he had a responsibility in setting up the right conditions, in giving life to his artist studio, in managing the circumstances under which 'the creative act' could take place. And of course he had to start painting the canvas, setting up the lines and colours that were necessary for the figure to emerge. But then... what had to happen then? *The accident had to happen*, Bacon claims time and again in his interviews. The diagonal line that came from nowhere and that affected everything, had to traverse the scene and 'make' the event. It had to un-organize the hand of the painter, the brush, the paint, the canvas, etc., in order to realize the impossible, that which could never have happened. The accident was not 'caused' by the painter, not by the paint or the studio, not by the History of Painting as it was always already involved in the scene. *The accident that was allowed to happen*, by all of these actors, took over.

How then to anticipate the taking place of the 'accident,' as Bacon calls it? How to anticipate the creative act, that event where new alliances install a new type of communality? Again, the artist shows us what to do, as it is the artist that (like all other non-human actors involved in creating the artwork) engages in an *affirmative* practice. The artist knows that the creation of a figure can only be done out of love. It can only happen if s / he is completely *occupied* with the creative act, with the unknown artwork that calls upon us from an impossible future. This occupation does not concern 'that which is about to be depicted,' albeit a body, a situation, an idea and so on. Only through an immense and unknown love, free-floating forms of exchange between the hand of the artist, the surface of the painting, the softness of the brush, the generosity of the paint, form new ecologies. It is an event as the artist (together with the paint, the brush, etc.) *is taken up* in the creative act. The good artist never stands opposed to the canvas (as the good canvas never stands opposed to the artist). There *has to be* an 'instant,' as Parmenides hypothesizes, when all involved *act as one*, and all involved, as one, invent new limbs, new languages, new forms, new ideas. All differences are taken up, momentarily, into a new and very powerful type of sameness.

What is being produced then we may call the artwork. But it is that which remains, which persists in being and which could only have happened in the process, which must be considered the commons. And this artwork does not have to be a painting (as with Bacon), a poem, a building, or whatever we today define as art. New creative, persistent and sustainable post-human ecologies can come into being from all sorts of creative acts; new communities can come into being in all sorts of material circumstances. It is the accidental process of realizing a mental, a social and an environmental whole that marks the commons.

Rick Dolphijn is a writer and philosopher teaching in the Faculty of Humanities, Utrecht University. He is interested in continental philosophy, art, technology and contemporary activism. He published in journals like *Collapse*, *Deleuze Studies* and *Continental Philosophy Review*. His books include *This Deleuzian Century: Art, Activism, Life* (edited with Rosi Braidotti) (2015) and *New Materialism: Interviews and Cartographies* (edited with Iris van der Tuin) (2012). Currently, Dolphijn is finishing a new monograph entitled *Surfaces: How Philosophy and Art Matter*.

Crosslinks

Common Conflict: onlineopen.org/common-conflict

Tags

Aesthetics, Commons, Communism

This text was downloaded on January 1, 2026 from
Open! Platform for Art, Culture & the Public Domain
onlineopen.org/to-realize-the-commons