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Mapping the urban commons: a parametrical and audiovisual method

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KEYWORDS

parametrization, urban mapping, urban commons, audiovisual.

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Figure 1: Collage of images (from left to right and from top to bottom): Working session on the parameters of Istanbul commons (Istanbul Technical University, November 2012); Taksim square as an urban commons on the map, four parameters proposal; video on Taksim Square / Gezi Park produced in the workshop Mapping the Commons of Istanbul.

1. INTRODUCTION

The discussion on the commons as has attained again much interest in the last decade due to the economic and political turmoil that neoliberalism and late capitalism has created. The management of what can be considered as commonwealth or common resources needed to be reconsidered, as the old distinction between private and public did not seem to be able neither to satisfy neither the need for understanding property nor to answer the vital question of how to share vital resources. In addition, digital culture has given us a new insight into the economics of sharing with a multiplicity of growing communities that produce, manage and share knowledge and information freely and openly.

The notion of the commons has been approximated by scholars from a myriad of fields of knowledge: political philosophy -M. Hardt and Negri-, urban geography -D. Harvey-, economy and social sciences -E. Ostrom-, history -P. Linebaugh-, law -U. Mattei, L. Lessing, Y. D Benckler- or digital culture -D. Bollier-. As a mixture of physical and relational parts, the concept of urban commons as a such lacks of an extensive academic literature. Which are the urban commons? Can those be map? How can we categorize them and understand them? How do we maintain them and protect them? In what ways are they different to property managed by the state or by individuals?

These are some of the questions that were raised and taken into consideration throughout the theoretical and practical work of the Mapping the Commons initiative. Mapping the Commons is a cartography project which was based on two workshops that took place in in Athens in December 2010 and in Istanbul in November 2012 respectively aiming to trace the contemporary role of the commons in the urban environment. As the issue of Commons has been the theme of numerous seminars, encounters and essays discussing the potential of influencing institutions in times of crisis, the aim of this project in this constellation is to add a "how to" to the academic and political discussion on the commons; to offer a methodological tool which can define and map the urban commons.

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The project was conceptualized and supervised by Pablo de Soto and Jose Pérez de Lama as a commission of the National Museum of Contemporary Art in Athens and it was realized in collaboration with professors and researchers from the Department of Media and Communication of the University of Athens, the National Technical University of Athens and Panteion University of Social and Political Sciences. In Istanbul the workshop was organized as part of the Amber festival in collaboration with Istanbul Technical University.

In this paper we aim to present the methodology that was followed, describe samples of the creative work that was produced and discuss the afterthoughts of the process.

2. METHODOLOGY

Part One. Introduction to theory

The first two/three days of each workshop are dedicated to presenting theoretical notions about the commons reflecting to a great extent the Italian school of thought and especially the analysis of Hardt and Negri in their latest book "Common Wealth". Aiming to help the participants to familiarise themselves with the concept, different definitions are offered and discussed in order to make clear what the commons used to mean and what is their current significance in the post-fordist condition. The team particularly examines how the notion has changed from the natural and cultural commons that are inherited and safeguarded from generation to generation, to the new artificial ones that are produced and shared by the many. It was agreed that a cartography of contemporary commons would need to refer not only to the soil and air or the language and memory inhabitants share but also to knowledge, information, codes and social relationships that are in a constant mode of becoming and being transformed.



Figure 2: Mapping the Commons of Athens workshop, december 2010.

The choice to focus on urban mapping seemed crucial as the metropolis, according to Hardt and Negri, is "the source of the common and the receptacle into which it flows". It is the environment where most of the productive and social activities of the multitude take place, where encounters happen, and antagonism as well as rebellion are expressed. In Negri and Hardt's words "*the metropolis is to the multitude what the factory was to the industrial working class...In the era of biopolitical production the metropolis increasingly fulfills this role as the inorganic body of the multitude*". In such a terrain, a mapping of the commons, could have no other aim but to highlight the city's living dynamic and its possibility for change.

To assist this, during the first days of the workshop participants are also introduced to different

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mapping projects and activists' initiatives in order to create a framework for the work that is to be produced in the following parts.

This first part of the workshop built the foundations on which later discussions are raised, and creative conflicts resolved.

Part Two. Parametrization and mapping

The second part is the most intellectually challenging, provoking discussions and creative conflicts. Opinions and concerns are formulated and evaluated through a collective process in order to proceed to the case studies of the third part of the workshop.

Participants are invited to propose examples of commons which they could identify in their city. These could be natural or artificial commons, or any collective effort that they considered as a systematic effort to preserve or create a commons in the urban environment. Working in groups the participants were invited to present a number of different cases for commons and to locate them on the map.

Following the initial proposal, a basic categorization under four kinds of common resources was followed. These were the Natural Commons, the Cultural Commons, the Public Spaces as Commons and the Digital Commons.

The map works in two ways: as a research map which functioned as a resource and database of commons and a display map which hosted video case studies created by the participants. Short descriptions links and photos are uploaded for all commons proposed. The value of this project is to initiate thinking about the concept of commons and to present the variety of actions that can be found in a metropolis related to this notion.

In order to focus on certain examples and analyse them in depth a system of parametrization is proposed through which it was possible to define the commons using the same parameters.

A full set of almost 30 parameters to define each common is initially proposed including aspects such as location, date of creation, wealth/rent/benefits generated, scale, community/network behind, approximate number of participants, socio-technical tools, maintenance costs, decision taking processes, level of conflict, relations with public / private realms.

This long list can be reduced –due to time restrictions- to four main parameters. Those are: Commons, Actor, Way and Conflict. Under 'Commons' a particular resource is for every case described. Under 'Actor' the people who actively undertake some action to preserve or create a common were mentioned. Under 'Way' the way through which this action took place was described. Finally under 'Conflict', the actors and conditions that are detrimental or opposing to the maintenance of each commons is identified. Using this simple first parametrization, a common ground for comparing ideas on commonwealth is created and some of the team ideas can be easily evaluated

This second part of the workshop is the core of the project as the research on the urban common wealth is conducted and fruitful discussions and creative arguments about the definition and features of the commons takes place. Subtle political debates and the current sociopolitical climates affect some of the team's decisions.

Part Three. Creating short documentaries

The second part of the workshop concludes in selecting a series of case studies to be developed in short video documentaries. For the third part, the participants were invited to work in teams, to share roles - such as shooting and editing- and focus in the production of the videos. In order to keep a stylistic uniformity a common template for titles was decided and a title card is included naming the four parameters defined beforehand. The form and style of the videos greatly vary . Some videos follow a documentary style of filmmaking based on the recording of protests and interviews of people, several follow a more abstract 'infographic'

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approach mixing graphical elements and titles, while others are mash ups from material found on the internet.

The stylistic variety help in approaching each common in a more appropriate way, but also give the creative freedom to each team to experiment with the aesthetic that they found more appealing to them. In Istanbul even though a greater stylistic coherence between the videos was attempted in terms of fonts and titles, a common structure or aesthetics were consciously avoided, allowing diverse views to be expressed.

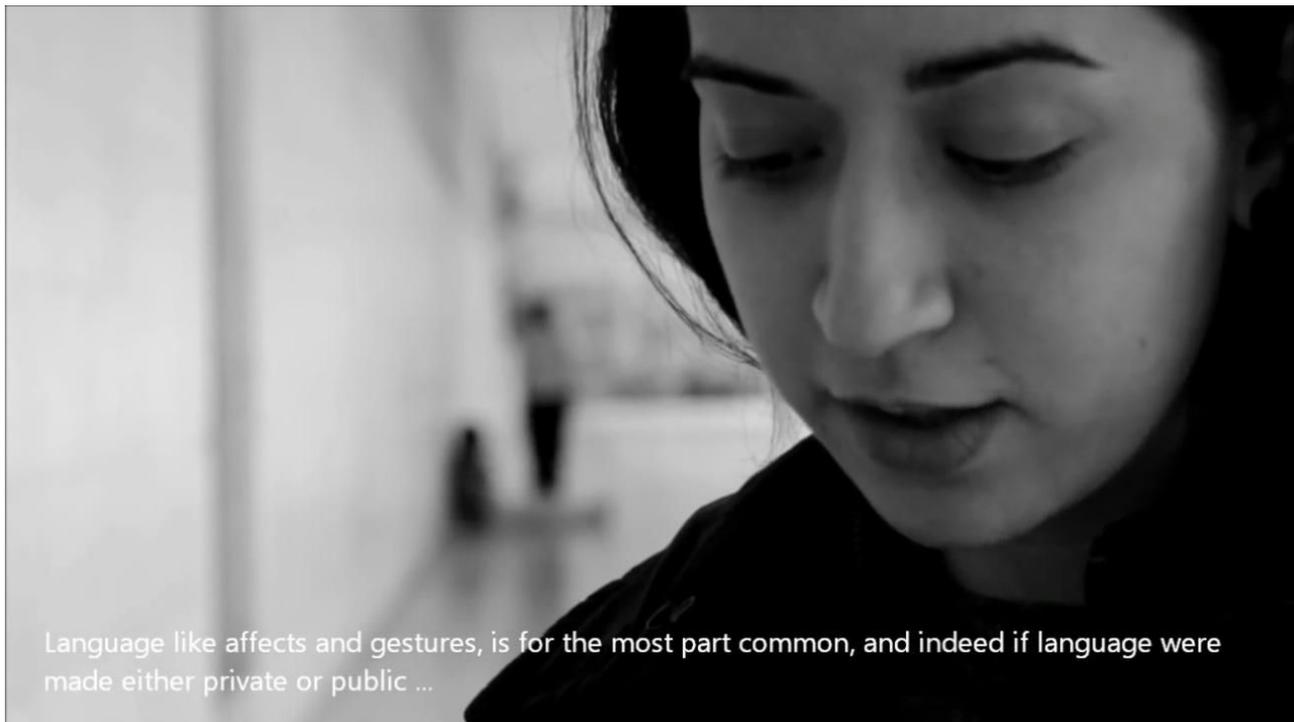


Figure 3: Language as a commons. Video screenshot, Mapping the Commons of Athens.

During the creation of the videos the theory is actually put to test. The ideas discussed have to become clear in order to direct the videos and avoid gaps and misconceptions which are always much easier to spot in an audiovisual piece. The aim of the videos is twofold: on the internal level to use them as a philosophical tool to describe and discuss commons and on the public level as a way to show - even selectively and fragmentally - the variety of actions that happen in a city in relation to its commonwealth. The third part is finalised with the uploading of the videos on a wiki-mapping tool, connecting them to their identified location.

1st case study: Athens

The Athens workshop took place at the end of 2010, a very crucial year for Greece. Six months after the first memorandum with IMF and the implementation of the first austerity measures, the Greek capital was called upon to play a new role. Athens was invited to become the "beta" city of crisis, to constitute the experimental ground for the emerging transitional economic period and to confront first in Europe the impasse of late capitalism.

The city burst with the energy of revolt and resistance. Protests and clashes with the police were extremely common and political discussions were taking place openly in the main Syntagma square where people had camped. Even though the country's economy was slowly sinking, citizens were more active than ever. It was an energetic atmosphere that unfortunately was badly crashed months later. The workshop took place in this critical period in which we could observe a very active engagement of the people in public affairs and a plethora of efforts not only to maintain commons but also to create new ones.

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Figure 4: Videocartography Mapping the Commons of Athens.

In Athens there was a tendency to ask questions about the commons that seemed quite poetic. Could Anger be considered as a commons for instance? This was the subject of one of the videos. In a space and time in which protest and constant clashes with the police were so frequent, this video made a statement regarding the outcome of dissensus and its expression. Another video presented the contact between stray animals and humans in the city capturing the importance of the presence of stray animals and the change that occurred before the time of the Olympic games in Athens. A team even asked if Graffiti could be considered as a common form of communication on the walls.

Digital Commons were represented by a video on open source software and a metropolitan network of wireless internet. A video on the notion of Language was in many ways a cornerstone for understanding cultural commons. Other videos presented the social movements around Athens, initiatives of sharing and exchange economy as well as the transformation of previously public or private areas into commons. In Athens the videos did not refrain from documenting actions which could be considered marginally illegal, such as graffiti, initiatives of ticket-crossing, as well as squatting and occupying areas, as the Navarinou Park.

2nd case study: Istanbul

The Istanbul workshop coincided with a very dramatic yet unsung event, the closure and rebuilding of Taksim Square, the central square of Istanbul, into a private shopping center. The whole city looked like it was facing an economic boom with huge investments taking place all

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over the metropolis.

However there were many downsides to this development process, and most of the videos that were produced in Istanbul focused on the dangers of development and the subliminal ways through which the public had little to no opinion on them. Apart from building development and its effects, one of the most important issues raised in Turkey was the issue of censorship. Through a university protest that was silenced in the media, the team started discussing the idea of the freedom of communication space.

Alongside the issue subject of media blackout and censorship, it was interesting to observe the feeling participants had in many cases that they should self-censor themselves and be cautious with the process of work. It was clear that many issues of extreme interest were not to be taken lightly. The relation between cultural commons and governance, which is a crucial issue in a multi ethnical state as Turkey was presented but not addressed during the workshop. This included the question of Kurdish minority, who was engaging in a national campaign to demand the right to use their own language on court and education and the two hundred political prisoners were on hunger strike around the country for several weeks. If the definition of language as common was generic in Athens workshop, in Istanbul it was embodied as an ongoing struggle and one of the biggest conflicts to be solved in society.

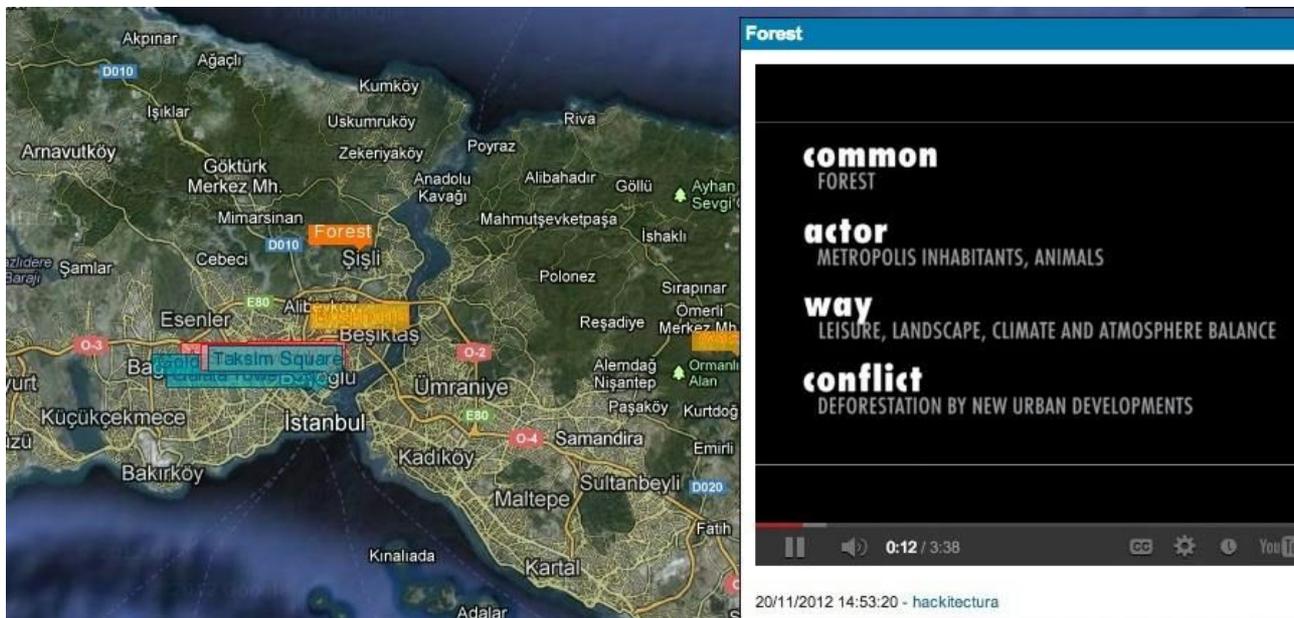


Figure 5: Forest as a commons, four parameters. Mapping the Commons of Istanbul.

In this context, the laboratory Mapping the commons of Istanbul played an intermediary role in understanding and disclosing conflicts regarding enclosures, raising debates about the concept of common good, and most importantly being part of the actions to document and protect the urban commons: the historical moments that occurred from May 28, 2013, with the so called Gezi uprising to defend the trees at Gezi park and the political and democratic space that represents Taksim Square.

All videos, maps and project information can be found at: <http://mappingthecommons.net>

NOTE:

Mapping the Commons received the "Elinor Ostrom Award" in 2013 at the category Common Wealth Research.

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WORKSHOP CREDITS:

Athens

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Istanbul

Instructors: Pablo de Soto (Federal University of Rio de Janeiro) in collaboration with Demitris Delinikolas (empty film, University of Athens). Event organizers: Ekmel Ertan (Amber Platform art director) and Aslihan Senel (Istanbul Technical University). Video Project Participants: Gizem Ağırbaş, Burcu Nimet Dumlu, Ecem Ergin, Onur Karadeniz, Fikret Can Kuşadalı, Marco Magnani, Zümra Okursoy, İpek Oskay, Sibel Saraç, Jale Sarı, Yağız Söylev, Ceren Sözer, Neşe Ceren Tosun, Ece Üstün, Wolke Vandenberghe, Daniele Volante, Volazs. The Project is co-organised by amber Platform and ITU Faculty of Architecture, Department of Architecture between 1-8 November 2012.

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