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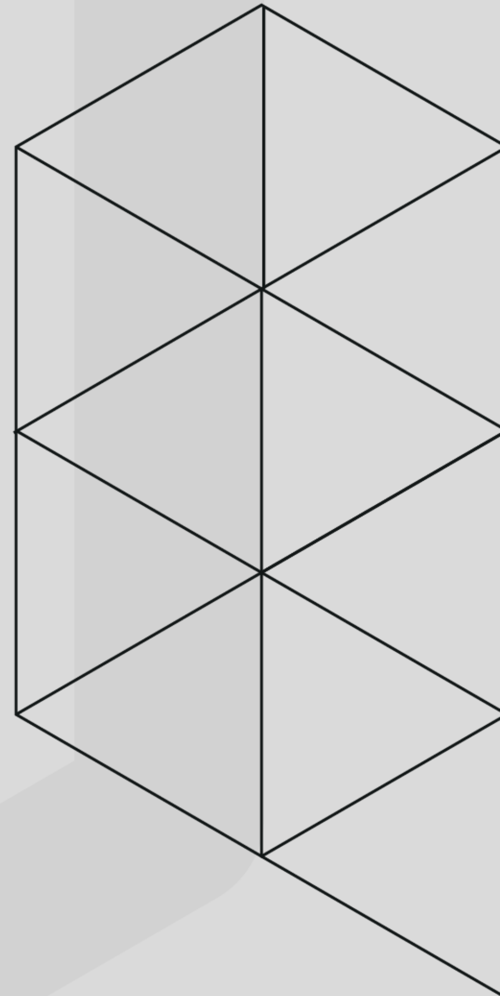
Beyond the neo-liberal value discourse towards a concept of social wealth



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Abstract

A neo-liberal narrative dominates the cultural value discourse wherein the value of publicly funded art and higher education is increasingly assessed on the basis of extrinsic values. Higher education is expected to contribute to the knowledge economy and the arts to social amelioration, cultural tourism and regeneration. Such an overt focus on the extrinsic values of art and education sidelines their intrinsic values – how they contribute to the common good by promoting collective well-being and sustaining a critical public sphere. Rather than arguing for how their intrinsic values might be marshalled into this neo-liberal value discourse as many cultural analysts continue to do, this article calls for a redefinition of value based on principles of commoning. In place of 'value', it looks to the concept of 'social wealth', which is created by radical experiments in producing the commons. It considers how 'art institutions of the common' and 'universities of the common' that have emerged in recent years are producing forms of social wealth that offer a viable alternative to the neo-liberal discourse of value.

KEYWORDS: neo-liberalism, cultural value, commoning, social wealth, contemporary art, higher education

Introduction

Since the 1990s, economic forces that emphasize the importance of achieving a return on investment have increasingly shaped arts and higher educational policies across Europe.1 This neo-liberal discourse dictates that culture and knowledge can no longer be justified on the basis of their intrinsic values – how they contribute to the common good by promoting collective well-being and sustaining a critical public sphere – but must produce extrinsic values that can be clearly articulated, quantified and audited.

Where several cultural analysts (Matarasso 1997; Holden 2004; Belfiore and Bennett 2008; Crossick and Kaszynska 2016) have argued for continued state support of the arts and higher education on the basis of how their intrinsic values can be marshalled into this neo-liberal value discourse, this article seeks to take a different course. It calls for a redefinition of value based on that which has been rendered insignificant or worthless by the neo-liberal audit culture, namely the unruly 'outcomes' and 'affects' the arts and education produce, anti-values that fail to produce sufficient return, or 'return of the expected type' to be considered an 'asset' to the neo-liberal value discourse (Sonderegger 2015: 41). In place of 'value', then, I look to the concept of 'social wealth', which is created neither by the market nor by the state, but by radical experiments in producing the commons. I consider how a number of so-called 'art institutions of the common' and 'universities of the common' have emerged in recent years and how their goal of producing forms of social wealth (rather than monetizable values) offers an alternative path beyond the neo-liberal discourse of value. [2]

Defining neo-liberalism

Given that I make the assertion that the values of neo-liberalism have shaped the arts and higher education in Europe, it is necessary to begin with a definition of neo-liberalism. To do this, I look to the multifaceted definition the critical geographer Simon Springer offers. Springer (2012: 136–37) proposes that neo-liberalism is best understood as having four interrelated and overlapping forms: a programme of government of the political right, the current dominant economic ideology, a state form, and a mode of self-governance

As a programme of government, neo-liberalism is synonymous with the deregulation of the market, the liberalization of trade and the privatization of public assets, services and natural resources. It upholds the belief that a free market, coupled with strong private property safeguards, is best placed to protect the individuals' liberties and freedom. This rhetoric is predicated on the assumption that a trickle down of wealth will benefit the whole of society and thereby eventually eliminate poverty. As the last 40 or so years have illustrated, this has not happened; economic inequality is getting worse rather than better. Hundreds of millions of people are living in extreme poverty, while the 1 per cent increase their wealth. According to Oxfam research, the world's 2153 billionaires are worth more than 4.6 billion of the world's poorest people (Oxfam 2020). Jeremy Gilbert argues that the true goal of actually existing neo-liberalism is the 'restoration of class power', because social mobility has decreased, not increased, under neo-liberal regimes (2016: 22–23). The class that has won out is the capitalist class embodied by multinational corporations that have more power that nation-states.

Springer claims that neo-liberalism is an ideology or a belief system that seeks to create a new reality for the human condition. Not surprisingly, most neo-liberals would refute this assertion given that every ideology claims realism; in other words, it claims that it is not an ideology but simply how things are done (Dockx and Gielen 2018: 54). Antonio Gramsci called this the 'common sense', referring to how the values of a dominant belief system become normalized in society through its social and cultural institutions. Moreover, and as Pascal Gielen (2018: 77–78) points out, neo-liberalism is an ideology of 'social suppression' that seeks to reduce social relations to economic ones.

Springer's third definition of neo-liberalism is that it is a state form. This presents somewhat of a conundrum given that this ideology is founded on a deep distrust of the state (and the welfare state in particular) and seeks to sever all links between the state and the market. But, as David Harvey (2007: 7) and Hardt and Negri (2006: 280) point out, the success of neo-liberalism is entirely dependent on the bureaucratic mechanisms of the state to create and maintain the conditions that are favourable to the unhindered operations of the market. Neo-liberalism is a state form precisely because it needs the government to enforce laws that protect private property, to privatize

public resources and assets, to corporatize its public institutions and to champion entrepreneurial behaviour.

This latter emphasis on promoting entrepreneurship leads onto Springer's fourth and final definition: that neo-liberalism is a form of self-governance. The labour market conditions that neo-liberalism promotes – namely precarity, insecurity and indebtedness – make it incumbent on the individual to be competitive and entrepreneurial in order to survive. As Asen (2017: 12) tells us, neo-liberalism seeks to reduce human behaviour to consumerism by transforming its subjects into homo economicus, defined as a 'creature of coldly calculated selfishness', who is solely concerned with personal success and 'competitive advantage'.

The neo-liberal turn in the university and the art institution

Although the term 'neo-liberal' can be reductive when applied to fields other than economics, there is generally a consensus (McGuigan 2005 Bishop 2014; Graeber 2004; Jelinek 2014) that both the university and the art sector have gradually internalized a number of values and practices that can be defined as neo-liberal.

For Thompson (2017: 344), the gradual shift towards a business model of the university, the beginnings of which he locates in the 1970s, can be interpreted as a political strategy that prioritizes the needs of the market over the needs of society. Gielen and De Bruyne (2014: 5) propose a more recent catalyst, claiming that the neo-liberalization of the university can be aligned with the signing of the Bologna Agreement in 1999, which decreed that all learning and knowledge generation across European universities should be measurable, comparable and uniform.

Both of these theses are evidenced in how universities are expected to operate like private for-profit businesses. In turn, this has resulted in a growth of market-like competition between universities through league tables and international rankings. It is also found in the increase in administrators with business/management and HR backgrounds (and an increase in their power and salaries relative to academic staff) and a commensurate decrease in full-time tenured

academic positions. In the United Kingdom, more than half of university lecturers are on temporary or hourly paid contracts (Chakrabortty and Weale 2016).

A growing emphasis on customer service in the neo-liberal university, which comes at the expense of scholarship, learning and the acquisition of knowledge, underscores how education has become a private good. University courses are increasingly developed to align specifically with market needs (and effectively reduced to employability training), and students are encouraged to consider which courses offer a better return on investment in 'the form of higher future income stream' (Busch 2017: 26). This is exacerbated by increased fees in many European countries since the 2008/09 financial crisis and the resulting culture of indebtedness that is foisted onto students.

While 'informationized knowledge' or data is the main economic value generated by the neo-liberal university, university buildings have more recently been viewed as assets that can be sold off. In 2015, the University of Amsterdam (UvA) began a process of closing down and selling off a number of its buildings across the city. In a response to an attempt to sell the Bungehuis – a building used by the Faculty of Humanities – to a private company that planned to convert it into a luxury, members-only hotel and spa, students and staff occupied the building for eleven days.

While the art school might be perceived to be more resistant to the forces of neo-liberalism, due to its legacy of teaching its students how to locate their work in a critical relationship to society, Suhail Malik (2015: 50–51) notes that it has not escaped. Today's art students are taught how to professionalize their practices in order to obtain a qualification that rubber-stamps entry to the artworld and its market circuits. Ironically, this does not mean that criticality is no longer taught in art schools; students are paradoxically encouraged to develop a critical attitude or 'interest' precisely in order to make their work more marketable. Malik (2015: 53) refers to this as 'zombie criticality' insofar as these forms of critique fail to construct 'counter-hegemonic formations'; instead, they contribute to the very professionalization of the art field they purport to critique.

The effects of neo-liberalism on the art system is not dissimilar to the university; they have both seen the introduction of a new managerial

class focused on the bottom line, only the focus in the art institution is on monetizing experiences (blockbuster exhibitions) and assets (public collections) rather than knowledge. The art system is also subject to various international ranking systems like the Sotheby's Mei Moses Indices, Artnet.com and ArtFacts.net, which pit artists against each other according to their projected economic value.3

Reduced state subsidies and government pressure to get match funding from the private sector has also forced public art institutions to be more business-orientated and populist in their outlook. Just as knowledge is being dumbed down in the university, the art institution focuses on the short-term attention economy with crowd-pleasing blockbuster exhibitions that are guaranteed to produce ticket revenue.

Under neo-liberalism, the public collections of museums and galleries are also perceived as assets that can be capitalized on despite the fact that they are the property of tax-paying citizens. In the United Kingdom, this capitalization has manifested in the deaccessioning of artefacts from public collections in order to reinvest the proceeds in capital works. In 2013, Croydon Council sold 24 Chinese ceramic works from its Riesco Collection through Christie's Hong Kong for £8 million (Sharratt 2013), and in 2014, Northampton Borough Council deaccessioned a fifth-dynasty Egyptian statue (depicting Sekhemka the scribe and his wife Sitmerit) from the public collection of the Northampton Museum and Art Gallery in order to build an extension to the museum that would host, among other things, a coffee shop (Johnston 2014).

Since the 1990s, the art museum has also been instrumentalized as a tool to remedy social exclusion and regenerate post-industrial cities. It is often the hub around which so-called cultural quarters are constructed with the intention of attracting inward investment. The Bilboa Guggenheim, completed in 1997, was, in many respects, the test case for this culture-led generation, and it was followed in Britain when New Labour invested a total of three billion in 2000 projects, including new flagship art centres (Hesmondhalgh et al. 2015: 101).[4]

The neo-liberal value discourse

Beyond the neo-liberal value discourse towards a concept of social wealth

This article makes the argument that, today, art and education (specifically the arts, humanities and social sciences) are shaped, moulded and judged on the basis of a value system that is anathema to their intrinsic values. Instead of valuing them for their contribution to the common good, they are expected to produce extrinsic values.

These extrinsic values fall under both the economic and social registers and have been enumerated in several UK state-sponsored reports in what has become known as the ‘cultural value debate’. In his report on the social impact of participation in the arts, which subsequently became the cornerstone of New Labour’s cultural policy in the late 1990s, François Matarasso (1997) lists 50 social benefits of participation in the arts. Subsequent reports by authors such as Holden (2004), Belfiore and Bennett (2008) and Crossick and Kaszynska (2016) added to this debate by outlining a range of benefits (both social and economic), including art’s purported ability to grow tourism, exports and the creative industries; renew civil society; generate social cohesion and stability; empower communities; reduce long-term unemployment, anti-social behaviour, crime and prison populations; and improve health and well-being. Within this rubric, artists are also increasingly expected to assume the roles of other professions whose labour is more clearly defined in terms of producing social benefit, such as social workers, humanitarians, problem-solvers, social entrepreneurs and conflict consultants.

In order to justify expenditure on the arts and higher education, then, cultural and education policy in the United Kingdom and Ireland (and across other European countries) has been aligned with other governmental policies such as welfare, communities and regeneration. Clive Gray refers to this as a ‘policy attachment strategy’, whereby state funding for the arts and education is justified by ‘demonstrating the role it can play in the fulfilment of the goals of other policy areas’ (2007: 206).

A policy attachment strategy came to the fore under New Labour in the 2000s as a means of justifying increased state support for art and culture. As Chris Smith, the then minister for culture, articulated in his party’s first cultural budget (for 1999–2001): ‘where public investment is made there must be some sort of return, in artistic value and reach, for the contributing public’ (1999: 14). Under New Labour, the arts in particular became scapegoats for governmental failures in other

policy areas. They were put to work to ameliorate issues such as social exclusion and inequality while, at the same time, functioning to conceal the shortcomings of the governmental system that perpetuated these inequalities (Ladkin 2017: 253).

In order to gauge how well the arts and education are fulfilling the policy goals set by government, neo-liberalism has introduced an audit culture. Not only must the arts and education produce the effects expected of them by government policy, but these effects must also be clearly legible and auditable (Ladkin 2017: 260).

The issue here is predominately to do with the manner in which auditing is conducted. The neo-liberal value discourse largely relies on the gathering of simplistic quantitative data in order to inform and justify state investment in the arts and education – data that is incapable of capturing the complexities of the values (and anti-values) produced in these fields. Throughout the 2000s, New Labour introduced some 1117 auditing systems and targets for publicly funded cultural institutions, many of which were later revoked when they were deemed to be ineffective (Hewison 2014: 122). Many extant reports that focus on articulating and measuring cultural values limit their focus to these narrow quantitative parameters and make no allowance for the subjectivity of aesthetic experience, nor how art and education can contribute to empowering communities, reinvigorating democracy or achieving social change (see Burgess et al. 2006; Art Council England 2010, 2012, 2014). As such, public cultural institutions are expected to justify their public subsidies not through their 'cultural achievements' but through the provision of detailed evidence-based reports about how what they do meets wider policy agendas.

According to Ladkin (2017: 255), policy-makers defend and justify the bureaucratic demands of the neo-liberal value and auditing discourse with claims of 'transparency, openness, accountability and legibility'. The flipside of this argument is the manner in which it uses 'transparency' to normalize a culture of social control, self-surveillance and self-censorship.

Neo-liberalism's desire for a self-disciplining citizenry, particularly in the public sector, stems from a deep-seated issue of distrust. A distrust of what universities and art museums are doing with public money. Gielen and De Bruyne (2014: 5) locate the origins of this

distrust in the difference between liberalism and neo-liberalism. While both ideologies promote the freedom of the market and hold that the state should have a very limited ability to interfere with its machinations, liberalism has a positive view of human freedom, while neo-liberalism is more sceptical. In order to control academics, curators and artists, then, neo-liberalism operates a system that not only observes, ranks and audits them but also rewards them for self-auditing and self-censoring. The outcome is a highly bureaucratic system that measures ‘not the worker’s ability to perform their job, but their ability to perform bureaucratic tasks effectively’ (Fisher and Gilbert 2016: 128).

Against the value discourse

In their book Against Value in the Arts and Education, Ladkin et al. (2017: 2, 19–21) take issue with the manner in which the value of the arts and education is reduced to their usefulness for the state and/or their value to the economy. Holding that this neo-liberal interpretation of value has tainted the rhetoric of value in its entirety (including so-called virtuous forms of value), they call for another means of thinking and talking about the arts and education that goes ‘against value’. In place of ‘value’, they call for a recognition of the ‘significance’ of the arts and education, or conversely their ‘insignificance’. Here they are explicitly referring to art and education’s ‘experiential (in)significance’ (a facet of their public good), which cannot be captured by the discourse of value. In particular, they call for the need to protect those elements that are destroyed by the audit culture of value, namely art and education’s ‘dissenting voice’, the ‘painful truths’ they are capable of revealing and their ‘ambivalence’ (Ladkin et al. 2017: 2).

In the field of education, this call to recognize ‘significance’ over ‘value’ is shared by academics who seek to justify the production of knowledge that the neo-liberal value discourse would consider to be unstable, nuanced, obscure, opaque, dissensual and unruly. Focusing on the forms of knowledge that specifically emerge from practice-led research in art and design, Sarat Maharaj (2004: 49) uses the term Vidya to theorize a middle ground between knowhow and ignorance, what he otherwise refers to as ‘non-knowledge’. Building on Maharaj’s research, Wilson and Ruiten (2013: 22) use

the term ‘knowing otherwise’ to account for and legitimize knowledge that exists outside of scientific rationality.

Thompson celebrates what he calls ‘the uselessness of the humanities’ noting that their (in)significance (in the absence of a monetizable value) is their ability to ‘reflect the world, to make sense of the world, to interpret discernible patterns in random contingencies, to create meaning out of random processes […] the very stuff of being human’ (2017: 350). In a similar vein, Bojesen (2017: 395–400) champions what he calls negative aesthetic education, or an education in existence. As I pointed out in the introduction, all of these so-called inferior forms of knowledge fail to produce the right kind of return to be considered of worth to the neo-liberal value discourse. They could therefore be said to exist outside the realm of value, or to exceed value.

In place of the argumentation set out above that seeks to replace the neo-liberal value discourse with a series of counterarguments that seek to justify the (in-)significance of the arts and education, Andrea Philips (2015) calls for a more radical and drastic step. She calls for arts devaluation, arguing that its intrinsic value – how it operates in its social context – can only be realized once art has been disconnected from the market. Her rather painful proposition for devaluing art begins with making transparent the financial machinations of the art system, including the often hidden transaction prices achieved in its primary sales market (when a work of art is sold by a commercial gallerist on behalf of the artist) and the value of donations and bequests by corporations and private donors to public museum (again this information is closely guarded as was evidenced by a three-year-long legal battle initiated by the Request Initiative against Tate to make public the value of its donations from BP over a 20-year period).[5]

It is Philip’s contention that this process of making transparent how the art system operates will be a catalyst for divestment by those whose interests in supporting the arts are purely to shore up their own capital and/or artwash their dubious business dealings, thereby bringing about the collapse of its inflated market and paving the way for ‘alternative economic modes of exchange’. In tandem with this making transparent of the art system’s financial dealings, she notes that it will be necessary to re-educate or retrain artists away from their current focus on ‘autonomous individuality’ and towards

collective and collaborative modes of working. She does not claim that this will be an easy or straightforward process, acknowledging that artists need to eat and that public museums need to pay their utility bills in order to keep their doors open.

What is unclear in Philips' proposition is how she imagines this devaluation will be achieved, or who will police it? Will it be a state-led programme that seeks to make the art system more egalitarian by heavily regulating its market? Or, will it come about as a result of a series of bottom-up initiatives that actively experiment with alternative economic modes of exchange that slowly replace the dominance of the art market? If any such devaluation can take place, it is my contention that it will likely be as a result of the latter. In fact, this work has already begun and can be located in radical experiments in commoning in both the fields of art and education. I will return to this point presently.

Regimes of property and the commons

The concept of 'property' runs throughout the arguments set out so far. The neo-liberal value discourse perceives the arts and education as forms of 'property'. Moreover, the distinction between private and public property no longer holds, insofar as the net cast by neo-liberal privatization increasingly ensnares the public, transforming it into property to be capitalized on by the state. As I have already pointed out, the neo-liberal state increasingly perceives universities and museums, as well as their buildings and public collections, as assets that can be capitalized on.

The autonomous Marxist thinkers Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri point out that there is an alternative to public and private property – the commons. Following this thinking, this article makes the argument that commoning – the act of producing a commonwealth of resources that are 'held in common' by everyone – offers art and education a way out, a means to exit the neo-liberal regime of property (in both its state and private forms) and to contribute to the production of a shared social wealth. Moreover, commoning offers a tangible solution to Philips' call for cooperative learning initiatives and

alternative economic modes of exchange that can replace art and education’s property relations.

Hardt and Negri distinguish between two types of commons: the ‘natural commons’, which includes the earth and all its natural resources, and the ‘social commons’, which encompasses the intellectual and immaterial products of human beings (Hardt 2010). In pre-capitalist societies, the natural commons were available to all for survival and sustenance. Under capitalism, the natural commons have slowly been enclosed and diminished for the profit of private individuals. Today, neo-liberal capitalist exploitation takes the form of new enclosures of the social commons.

The tenets of commoning are broadly shared among its proponents. Not unlike socialism and communism, commoning is a desire for a more socially equitable society. Its central tenet is the belief that social relationships can replace financial ones, and, to these ends, commoners aim to reverse capitalism’s ‘enclosure’ of the commons so that all can have an equal share in humanities’ resources. Where neo-liberalism seeks to accumulate profit at any cost, commoning is concerned with sustainability and with the earth’s ecosystem as a whole. In fact, social life in its entirety is the territory of commoning, and this includes both working and living conditions but also issues of race, class and sexuality. Its appeal, then, is wider than the appeal of communism or socialism was to the working classes in the nineteenth century, because it welcomes and works for all those who are marginalized by neo-liberalism (Gielen 2018: 85).

The growing interest in commoning comes from dissatisfaction, and often deep despair, with the status quo and the manner in which it suppresses social life. Unlike social movements that engage in protest actions from within the hegemonic coordinates of the neo-liberal state, commoning is prefigurative. In other words, it seeks to create this better future by actively testing out new collective and collaborative forms of living and being together in the here and now. In this regard, it might also be understood as an ideology, a proposition that Dockx and Gielen (2018: 55–56) make when they put forward the term ‘common-ism’. They also go so far as to claim that commonism is an emerging (counter-)ideology capable of facing down neo-liberalism.

For Hardt and Negri (2006: 348), commoning calls for a double movement of flight and constituent power – first, exiting the state institutional landscape, and second, engaging in acts of self-instituting. Hardt and Negri's 'double movement' variously came to fruition during the occupations and assemblies that took place across the globe in 2011, including the Occupy movement, the Las Indignados protests for 'real democracy' in Spain and the anti-austerity protests in Syntagma Square in Athens. What was unique about these events is how the participants invented alternative forms of democratic and economic exchange, in addition to ways to live, eat, sleep, wash and learn together in relative harmony.

Gielen (2018: 82, 86), unlike Hardt and Negri, is careful not to romanticize the commons. He describes its social dynamics as passionate and heated, noting that the line between heated debate and violence is a thin one. He also reminds us that, like any ideology, commoning has both utopian and dystopian aspects. The latter can be found in the issue of social control, namely how the commons govern fair and equal participation and what sanctions it uses for those who fail to conform to its rules. How far it goes with those sanctions marks it out as being democratic or authoritarian.

Art and education beyond the market (and beyond the state)

Within the university, critical responses to neo-liberalization have resulted in experiments with alternative, non-hierarchical and bottom-up models of learning in the form of the 'university from below', the 'counter-institution' or the 'free school'. In the art field, this has been replicated in what Paul O'Neill and Mick Wilson (2010) term the 'educational turn', a phenomenon that has seen the inclusion of experimental educational projects in or as art and curatorial practice, with the aim of employing critical pedagogy to overhaul an art system that has been infiltrated and corrupted by market values.

These pedagogical initiatives first began to emerge across Europe and in the United States in the late 1990s and ranged from a critical reading group in New York's financial district (16 Beaver Street, 1999–2020) to a free university in private apartment in the suburbs of Copenhagen (The Copenhagen Free University [CFU], 2001–07). From a roving knowledge exchange platform for and by displaced peoples and forced migrants (The Silent University, 2012–20) to a classroom on the streets of St Petersburg (The Street University, 2008). And from parasitical projects initiated by art students to

supplement their college studies (The Proto-Academy, Edinburgh, 2000–02; Basic Space, Dublin) to a plethora of legally constituted cooperative universities (The Social Science Centre [SSC], Lincoln, 2010–19; The Really Open University, Leeds, 2010–12; The Free University of Liverpool, 2011–13; Co-operative College, Manchester, 2019–20; Mondragon University, Mondragón; Florida Universitaria, Valencia; and UNivSSE, Athens).

Although widely varying in form, what many of these initiatives have in common is a tendency to self-institute and self-accreditize that, as Gregory Sholette (2016: 4) points out, is evident in their naming as 'official sounding' institutions, academies and foundations, despite the fact that they cannot, or choose not to, make official awards.[6] I will focus here on two examples of pedagogic initiatives that arguably best exemplify the principle of commoning and the forms of social wealth it produces: the SSC in Lincoln (which emerged from the university sector) and the CFU (a project initiated by two artists).

The SSC in Lincoln was established in 2011 by a group of academics and students as a social cooperative, not-for-profit organization that is collectively and democratically run by its members through participatory models of governance. Its operational structure decrees that all its members have an equal say in its running, and all elected roles are rotated (Hall and Winn 2017: 16).

The catalyst for the emergence of the SSC was the implementation of the findings of the Browne Report by the UK government in 2010, which resulted in the withdrawal of state support for third-level tuition fees and the cutting of all funding for the arts, humanities and the social sciences (essentially all non-STEM subjects). The SSC was established to cater for those students who could not afford the newly introduced fees of £9000 per annum and were otherwise reluctant to take out student loans for fear of being unable to pay back their debt after graduation. It offered an equivalent, part-time education to its student-scholars at a low cost on the basis that academic-scholars donated their time for free, and everyone paid an annual subscription equivalent to one hour's net salary per month (with exemptions for the unwaged). While the SSC did not award degrees, student-scholars could enrol in courses that were equivalent to mainstream undergraduate, postgraduate and Ph.D. degrees. They were assessed not on pre-determined learning outcomes but on a mutual acknowledgement between the members and associate external

members (academic-scholars who assume the role of 'expert reviewers') that they had acquired a desired level of knowledge in their subject area.

The core principles of critical pedagogy – that 'teachers and students have much to learn from each other', and that the latter should play an important role in shaping the curriculum – were central to the SSC's structure, as was a focus on the social relevance of the curriculum, which sought to reflect the values of a cooperative society and was embedded in the real-life concerns of its members and their local communities in Lincoln (Neary and Winn 2017: 10). As such, the SSC's membership base sought to be as egalitarian as possible, and their recruitment strategy targeted new members from all social and economic backgrounds and age demographics, including school leavers, the retired, part-time workers and the unemployed. Courses offered focused on producing socially useful forms of knowledge and included an introduction to Social Science Imagination and shorter courses tailored to the need of local marginalized groups, including the homeless and offenders (Neary 2013).

For a period of six years, the CFU operated out of a spare room in a private flat on the outskirts of Copenhagen. Visitors to this unorthodox space were confronted with a one-room university that also doubled as a gallery, a residency space for international guests (a mattress strapped to the wall fulfilled this function) and a bookshop. A door at the rear of the room led through to the private residence of its organizers and founders: Henriette Heise and Jakob Jakobsen. This door was typically left open, and the activities of the CFU often overflowed into the home, just as the sounds of domestic life and the smells of cooking wafted into the university.

The CFU was engaged in the production of a critical vocabulary that sought to challenge the processes of neo-liberalization to which the Danish public university sector has been subjected in recent years (Lillemose 2011). With the establishment of their alternative institution for knowledge production, Heise and Jakobsen attempted to sever the links between knowledge and capital (albeit at a micropolitical level) and to reconnect knowledge with their everyday domestic lives, with collectivity and with emancipatory pedagogies. This effectively entailed replacing the values of the neo-liberal university with their own counter-critical ones. Like the SSC, the CFU refused the hierarchical relationship of teacher/student in favour of a

peer learning environment. As Jakobsen explains: ‘[t]here was never any education within the Copenhagen Free University; there was no teaching. It was always a space of sharing. It was based on people coming and sharing what they knew’ (cited in Mahony 2015).

Also like the SSC, the CFU sought to reclaim knowledge for collective and communal purposes. As such, it functioned as a learning community open to anyone and everyone who wanted to ‘unlearn capitalism’, regardless of their academic qualifications or economic means (Jakobsen 2010). The activities of the CFU were structured around research strands or topics that included ‘feminist organization’, ‘art and economy’, ‘escape subjectivity’, ‘media activism’ and ‘art history’ (The Free U Resistance Committee 2011).

Neither of these ‘universities of the common’ continue to operate; both proved unsustainable in the longer term. After nine years of operating, the SSC closed its doors in February 2019. Its members, many of whom had to work full time in other roles, acknowledged that its organizational form and funding structure was too challenging (Winn 2019). Six years after they opened the doors of the CFU, Heise and Jakobsen took the decision to dissolve it in order to avoid it being institutionalized and recuperated by the art establishment, from which they had received numerous approaches to ‘exhibit’ the CFU. They refused these invitations on the grounds that to represent their ‘self-institution’ within an institution of the society of control would effectively disconnect it from its domestic setting and, therefore, also from its connection to the politics of everyday life (The Free U Resistance Committee 2011). The members of the SSC were conscious of a related concern, namely that of being interpreted by the political right as a player in the then Conservative Lib Dem government’s ‘Big Society’ agenda, which co- opted and promoted public volunteering as a means to mask cuts to essential welfare services such as education and health (Neary 2013).

However, neither institution saw its closure as a failure, nor did they view it as signalling an end to their activities of producing the common. On the contrary, they saw their experimental institutions as models that others could adapt and build on. Heise and Jakobsen stress the importance of inspiring people to create their own self-institutions, acknowledging that the CFU could on its own only ever have had a limited resonance: ‘the ultimate experience of the free university would be for the people who come here to go home and do

it themselves' (cited in Berry et al. 2002: 5). Their end goal was to inspire the creation of a network of local free universities, each offering alternative sites for the production and sharing of knowledge (Berry et al. 2002: 5). In a similar vein, when discussing the SSC, Neary states:

We have created a model for alternative higher education that people could use and develop, changing and adapting it to suit their own local contexts. We are excited about what has been established in Lincoln, but there is still a lot of work to do.

(2013)

While a number of artist-led initiatives such as Park Fiction, Hamburg (1995–2020), Machine Project, Los Angeles (2003–18) and Mess Hall, Chicago (2003–13) have adopted a similar methodology to the SSC and the CFU – namely self-instituting and adopting a cooperative structure – I want to focus here on the attempts made by a number of publicly funded art institutions to internalize some of the principles of commoning while still maintaining their public status.

Gerald Raunig (2015: 33) lists a number of examples of public art institutions in Europe that have made significant strides towards becoming what he calls 'institutions of the common'. They include Rooseum in Malmö, Shedhalle in Zurich, the Nordic Institute for Contemporary Art (NIFCA) in Helsinki, Museu d'Art Contemporani de Barcelona (MACBA), the Van Abbemuseum in Eindhoven and The Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía in Madrid. To his list, I would add Casco Art Institute: Working for the Commons in Utrecht.

Following a similar logic as I apply to the university of the common, the art institution of the common can only come into being when the public art museum undergoes a number of radical changes. First, it must adopt what a number of commentators have referred to as a 'relational approach' (Möntmann 2008: 3; Borja-Villel 2010: 283; Bishop 2014: 43; Kolb and Flückiger 2014: 26). Relationality is a methodology whereby the critical institution defines itself by virtue of the publics (and counterpublics) it collaborates with. As such, it seeks the active participation of diverse communities – including migrant communities, the disenfranchised, educational activists and social movements – and enables these collaborators to actively shape the trajectory of the institution (Kolb and Flückiger 2014: 26). To this,

Raunig (2013: 172–73) adds that it must experiment with ways in which to deterritorialize its operational structures in line with the horizontalist and grassroots methodologies these groups employ.

A further facet of the art institution of the common is how it understands the importance of a relationship of equality between the institution, its staff and its users. As such, it embraces an emancipatory approach to knowledge production that rejects the ‘short-term attention economy’ propagated by the neo-liberal art institution and focuses instead on durational projects that encourage longer-term and more critical engagement. For example, Casco Art Institute: Working for the Commons structures its programme around an annual assembly focused on ‘changing the (institutional) conditions and structures for art towards the goal of commoning art institutions’ (Casco 2020). It also hosts a quarterly ‘School in Common’ that operates as a site for discussion for local or trans-local communities around a number of intersecting study lines, including the Center for Ecological (Un)learning, Diverse Economies, Angry Letters, Poetics of Living, and Commonist Aesthetics.

The art institution of the common also encourages peer learning and self-education through access to its collections and/or archives, where members of the public or ‘commoners’ can formulate their own narratives. The collection-based art institution of the common seeks to problematize its history, particularly the hegemonic, colonial and western narratives of art, by bringing to attention alternative artists, scenes and modes of representation that are perceived to be peripheral to it. At MACBA, Manuel Borja-Villel pursued this goal through a focus on acquisitions by artists from regions like Latin American and Eastern Europe, but also by looking to artists working within the West whose work deviated from the linear trajectory of modernism (e.g. Philip Guston, Antoni Tàpies and Brassaï). He continues this work at the Reina Sofía where the collection displayed is openly critical of Spain’s colonialist past.

A further necessary step for the collection-based art institution is to liberate its collection from its ‘pseudo-ownership’ by the state and to transform it into a commons for the generation of social wealth. This is a goal that was initiated by Borja-Villel (2009: 34–35) during his tenure as director of the MACBA and is being continued in his current role at the Reina Sofía. For Borja-Villel, this reconceptualization of the art museum collection as an archive functions as a levelling

process between reified art objects and documents, copies, photographs and other ephemera that normally reside in an archive. It serves to undermine the aesthetic autonomy and preciousness of art and generate a surplus of new narratives and counternarratives between art and non-art objects. At both MACBA and the Reina Sofía, archival material is regularly displayed alongside art works from the collections. Picasso's Guernica (1937), arguably the most visited work in the Reina Sofía collection, is contextualized in its sociopolitical history in a hang that includes propaganda posters and magazines from the Civil War, drawings by official war artists and a replica of the Pavilion of the Spanish Republic where the painting was first displayed. In an adjacent gallery, Jean-Paul Dreyfus's documentary of the Spanish Civil War, titled Spain 1936, is screened (Bishop 2014: 40). Borja-Villel has even gone so far as to attempt to legally recategorize works of art from the Reina Sofía collection as 'documentation' in order to increase their accessibility. As Bishop notes: 'the public can go to the library and handle them, alongside publications, ephemera, photographs of works of art, correspondence, prints and other textual materials' (2014: 44).

Not unlike the university of the common, there are often limitations to the extent that a public art institution can sustain a trajectory of commoning, insofar as they necessarily operate from within the hegemony of the neo-liberal state and are ultimately accountable to local politicians, state funding bodies and corporate donors. The neo-liberal status quo impacted negatively on several of the institutions mentioned above. In 2006, two years after Charles Esche resigned from Rooseum, it was amalgamated as a branch of Sweden's conservative Moderna Museet. In the same year, NIFCA lost its funding and was closed down. When Borja-Villel left MACBA, his successor, Bartomeu Marí, returned the institution to a conservative course, and in 2012, the Van Abbemuseum was threatened with severe budget cuts despite the positive press it had received for its radical programme.

That said, the Van Abbemuseum and the Reina Sofía continue their experimentation with their politically engaged and relational programmes and continue to be supported by state funding. Furthermore, the director of Casco Art Institute: Working for the Commons, Binna Choi, firmly believes that commoning practices are fully compatible within the structure of a publicly funded art institution, and that a completely horizontal operational structure (as in the case

of the cooperative) is neither necessary nor desirable. While Casco upholds a principle of decentralized and shared governance, it retains an institutional-organizational structure and team that, in turn, facilitate the use of its resources by its 'commoner-participants'. In this regard, Casco sees itself as an institution as opposed to a collective, but one that is clearly focused on producing the commons and prefiguring social change through 'art-as-commoning' (McAnally 2017).

Conclusion: Towards a social wealth

When the principle of commoning is applied to the fields of art and higher education, it calls for the exchange of the affects and knowledge they produce, not for private profit, not even for the public good, but for the common good. This common good can be understood as 'social wealth', a radical form of wealth that connects social individuals as opposed to creating profit. Moreover, where the law of the market dictates that scarcity drives demand and ultimately increases profit, social wealth is based on the principle of abundance.

I argue that social wealth offers a means of thinking beyond the neo-liberal value discourse of extrinsic values that can be harnessed and ultimately monetized by the neo- liberal state. This concept of 'thinking beyond' is crucial, because there is arguably no truly equitable and democratic version of state-funded art and education to return to. Each of these fields has been shaped and corrupted by classist values. Nor is there a way to adequately rewrite the neo-liberal value discourse from within the coordinates of the neo-liberal state. Commoning the fields of art and education is a proposition to organize things differently, where all are welcome, all are equal, everyone's input is acknowledged and respected and where all outputs are shared for the common good, rather than being siphoned into private profit. These outputs might be best understood as socially useful forms of knowledge that, when put to work, are capable of interrupting the producer/consumer paradigm of neo-liberalism.

While several of the commoning projects I have discussed have reached the limits of what they can achieve, others – like Casco – continue with their experimentations. What this article has attempted to demonstrate is that the collective effect of these experiments in commoning has begun to forge a roadmap – a new way of defining

the role of the arts and education – that is not attempting to expand or augment the neo-liberal value discourse but instead move beyond it.

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Notes

1. I bring the fields of art and higher education together in this article (specifically education in the arts, humanities and social sciences) because of how they have experienced – and fought back – the brunt of the neo-liberal value discourse and its audit culture. Art and education are, by their nature, messy, disruptive and unsettling, and it is precisely these anti-values that enable them to push back

against a neo-liberal value discourse that would mould them in line with its own neo-conservative values.
2. By ‘social wealth’ I am referring to a radical new form of wealth that is ‘based not on profit making but on connecting the needs and capacities of social individuals’ (Neary and Winn 2017: 29).

3. The Sotheby’s Mei Moses Indices and Artnet calculate the ‘worth’ of an artist based on the prices their works achieve on the secondary auction market. ArtFacts utilizes econometrical methods to rank artists based on their exhibition records in museums and galleries that are, in turn, accorded their own ranking for prestige; for example, a solo exhibition at London’s Tate Modern would afford an artist far more cultural capital than inclusion in a group exhibition at a regional art museum in the United Kingdom.

4. Some of the regional art centres they were responsible for building included the MK Gallery, Milton Keynes (1999), the New Art Gallery, Walsall (2000), The Lowry, Salford (2000) and the BALTIC Centre for Contemporary Art, Gateshead (2002).

5. In 2014 the court ruled that Tate was contravening information law and they were ordered to make the disclosures (Richens 2014).

6. Cooperate College, Manchester, is currently developing a programme to award undergraduate degrees.

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