

^{xxx}activities, archives, art centres, artist-run centres, book shops, catalysts, classes, collaborative, collectives, common spaces, community projects, conceptual practices, conferences, contexts, conversational spaces, conversations, curatorial spaces, digital commons, digital publishing, discussion platforms, discussions, displays, documentation spaces, editorial platforms, emergent artistic practices, event series, events, exhibition spaces, exhibitions, experimental, flexible, forums, frameworks, galleries, gatherings, global, hubs, independent companies, independent publishing, initiatives, itinerant, laboratories, loci, machines, nodes, nomadic, non-profit, offices, online publishing, online resources, open platforms, organs, partnerships, platforms, print on demand, programming spaces, programs, project spaces, projects, publishing spaces, quasi-exhibition spaces, reading rooms, research, residency spaces, resource centres, self-publishing, seminars, small-press publishing, studio spaces, talks, workshops, workspaces^{xxx}

X-enos¹ – Uncommon Commons among catalysts, forums, frameworks, initiatives, loci, nodes, platforms, spaces

by Ksenia Cheinman

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Many publications have appeared in recent years addressing the issue of “alternative spaces for art” either through publishing platforms, post-studio multipurpose practices or as a result of the pedagogical turn, namely the *Artists’ Magazines* (2011) by Gwen Allen, *The Studio* (2012) by Jens Hoffmann, *Education* (2011) by Felicity Allen, among others. Similarly, familiar to us through the works of various artists and collectives, such as Liam Gillick, Michalis Pichler, and Dexter Sinister, “discussion platforms”, infiltrations, and learning contexts have emerged as central mediums of artistic reflection, expression, and dissemination.

Amidst these recognizable entities, we also find some more nebulous ones that characterize the current artistic landscape. One such initiative is *Metronome*, “an organ rather than a magazine or publishing enterprise”, a “conversational structure”.² Founded by Clémentine Deliss, this pulsating organ, *Metronome* defines many facets of today’s alternative artistic practice. For instance, it alerts us to “the rising interest in the development of new *common spaces*, of local and international environments of production that provide civic protection and enable intellectual heresy to be performed within the same surroundings”.³

The re-discovery of the *common spaces* is not surprising given that our daily discourse is constantly invaded by the concept of the Commons. Mostly known to us through the global networks of Wikipedia, this idea is also broadening its roots through the Creative Commons movement as well as the push towards Research and Learning Commons within academic institutions. The term has long become part

¹ *xenos* – Greek for guest, stranger. Marina Roy, *Sign after the X* (Vancouver: Artspeak, 2001), 79.

² Clémentine Deliss, “Metronome”, in *Kiosk: Modes of Multiplication*, eds. Christoph Keller and Michael Lailach, 73-74 (Zürich: JRP Ringier, 2009).

³ *Ibid.*, 74.

of the *everyday*, but its meaning is far from clear. According to Charlotte Hess and Elinor Ostrom, historically, in Europe, for example “‘commons’ were shared agricultural fields, grazing lands, and forests,”⁴ while in the United States, “commons has most often referred to shared spaces that allow for free speech and the democratic process”⁵. It is only in the mid-1990s that the concept of knowledge commons started infiltrating the interdisciplinary conversation, with libraries representing the knowledge commons *par excellence*.⁶ It seems that in its colloquial form, the Commons has taken on a more generic meaning of shared resources that may be used either collectively or in a participatory fashion.

While varieties of Commons proliferate in both urban and academic contexts, the artistic and publishing arena has taken this concept further, creating new cultural ecologies at the intersection of commerce, culture, and community spaces.

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One such example is X Marks the Bökship⁷ which is much more than a project space for independent publishers in London, UK. Serving multiple functions, it is at once a bookshop, a production and promotional facility, a networking space, a community node, a learning platform, and a conversational infrastructure.

The description of its Editions project, XALPHABET, consisting of 26 letter ‘X’ prints by 26 artists, designers and writers, offers insight onto the conceptualization of this project:

The X belongs to many people: mark makers, sign writers, mathematicians and musicians. An X can represent a letter, a number, a symbol, a sign, a pattern or hidden treasure. The X has been adopted by the subversive as a symbol of protest. A strike. A NO. And also as an affirmation. A signature. A vote. A YES. X ruptures the system and then fills in the space it creates.⁸

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Rich with workshops, talks, exhibitions, book launches, performance readings, and screenings ranging from art films to animation, Bökship is definitely an event space that is conceptually rewarding, offering such stimulating event series as “filling in the blanks” which investigate performance of a blank book. Those less interested in the form and materiality of the printed objects are invited to join the erotic book club or the short fiction and essays by women book club. Artists, poets, translators, writers and readers are also welcome to participate in Bökship’s residency program where they can explore links between art and language through presentations, workshops, and writing. The Publisher of the Month initiative promotes unique publishers and fosters collaboration and networking with the broader artistic community.

⁴ Charlotte Hess and Elinor Ostrom, eds., *Understanding Knowledge as a Commons: From Theory to Practice* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2005), 12. <http://site.ebrary.com/lib/ubc/Doc?id=10173555&ppg=27>

⁵ *Ibid.*, 13.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 4.

⁷ <http://www.bokship.org/>

⁸ Bökship, “XALPHABET”, *Bökship*, <http://bokship.org/xalphabet.html>

Some of Bökship's longer projects include thematic events and workshops such as *Towards a Physiological Novel* which is a series of eight bi-weekly talks and screenings reflecting on communication and production of 'noise and nervousness' in the electronic era. As part of this initiative, artists, writers, and theoretical thinkers were invited to discuss how information circulates and impacts society at a human level. Another important event is *Publication as Practice* - a short course on concepts that inform artists' publications, addressing such topics as the archive, photobooks, books on books, art writing, the colophon, photography and the magazine page, distribution, artist's newspapers, slimvolume, the gallery as publisher, appropriation, and architectural inspiration, among others. One of its latest projects, which can be learned about from Bökship blog⁹, is the *eShelf*, a collection of online publishing activities by artists as well as a series of live events dedicated to digital publishing initiatives and resources.¹⁰

Yet what is most unique about Bökship, positioning it at the crossroads of art and life, is the incorporation of communal eating as part of its regular programming. For instance, a Studio Cookbook Launch is accompanied by a lunch¹¹; moreover, Publisher lunches and brunches are a common occurrence at the space, including such homemade goodies as soups, quiche, swamp brownies, wine, and bread. In fact, judging from one of the events, "an evening of book presentations, readings, and soup, alongside a one-night-only exhibition and presentation by [a] poet"¹² seems to be a good description of the general Bökship activities, where guests may be strangers and strangers guests, exploring uncommon subject matter in a welcoming communal space.

Defying the "pervading professionalism of 'contemporary art'" and exhibiting both "an aesthetic of partnership and an aesthetic of distribution"¹³, articulated by Sylvie Boulanger, the founder of the edition art centre *Cneai* in Chatou France, Bökship stages a new type of contemporary framework where discursivity, communal participation, and fluctuating roles of producers and the public are constantly revealed. As an event space, Bökship not only engages but also redefines the *event-essence*, making each happening a catalyst, a platform for further discussion, and a locus for experimentation. Consequently, each *event* becomes communal even when individual, incorporating and enriching the everyday. There is a certain celebration of collectivity and togetherness in a small yet bustling multipurpose space (reminiscent of apartment art¹⁴), quite different from the traditional atmosphere of galleries and museums, mostly aimed at individual introspective enjoyment within a big semi-empty room. The cultural space becomes creative, productive, commercial, domestic, and educational all at once – a contemporary Co-Op, or rather X-Op (involving an indeterminate number of cultural operations under one roof).

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⁹ <http://bokship.wordpress.com/>

¹⁰ <http://www.eshelf.info/>

¹¹ <http://bokship.wordpress.com/2011/07/17/book-launch-lunch-studio-cookbook-by-ken-kirton-saturday-23-july-1pm-%E2%80%936pm/>

¹² Bökship's Blog, "Evergreen / Friday 30th March 2012, 7pm – 9pm", Archive, March 2012, <http://bokship.wordpress.com/2012/03/>

¹³ Sylvie Boulanger, "Cneai", in *Kiosk: Modes of Multiplication*, eds. Christoph Keller and Michael Lailach, 76 (Zürich: JRP Ringier, 2009).

¹⁴ Apartment art, in Soviet Russia, referred to as *apart*, was an important element of Moscow Conceptualism in 1970s incorporating among other elements *samizdat* (self-publishing) editions, and events, replacing the 'kitchen salons' of the 1960s. Svetlana Boym, "On Diasporic Intimacy: Ilya Kabakov's Installations and Immigrant Homes", *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 24, No. 2, Intimacy (Winter, 1998), 503, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1344176>

In his essay, describing Julia Feyrer's project *The Poodle Dog Ornamental Bar*, the Vancouver-based writer Michael Turner describes her work as "a node of social exchange, where you could take in a performance, contribute (to) one, or buy things".¹⁵ According to Turner, Feyrer's work is emblematic of a process where the site of production becomes the medium of exchange rather than a mere set for the film that presents itself as a final product. Similarly, spaces for independent publishing and independent publishing projects such as X Marks the Bökship serve not simply as a means to an end, but are in themselves valuable social entities that perforate the current information landscape. Positioning artistic practice at the juncture of the written, printed, performed, displayed, expressed, shared, and sold, they form a new current, a collective, collaborative, connected, yet critical form of cultural reflection, blurring the boundary between commercial, conceptual, and community-based spectrums of artistic production.

These spaces that merge production and distribution spaces into one in a capitalist system become community hubs known for their local engagement yet international reach. It is in this sense that they become a unique set of Uncommon Commons where unlikely facilities meet, often combining book shop and library/reading room spaces, exhibitions and communal food venues, music events and theoretical courses. They are not community centres as far as their mandate goes, neither do they try to please the general public, but they are community spaces where everyone is welcome to become part of a meta-community in the form of an X-Op.

Despite the current fashionability of the Commons phenomenon, it is important to remember that "a commons is not value laden—its outcome can be good or bad, sustainable or not"¹⁶. While it is difficult to say whether such a model of multi-operational, non-profit commons is sustainable in the long run, it is clear that it is aimed at fostering a new, more flexible mentality, where life and art rub shoulders in a very narrow alleyway that is domestic rather than forbidding, and where space shrinks to include both private and public elements in a hybrid setting. As integral yet still sparse and little-noticed spaces, independent art publishing initiatives such as X Marks the Bökship thus become a frame through which to see the current cultural landscape, a little opening onto the world at large

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PAINTING TO SEE THE ROOM

Drill a small, almost invisible, hole
in the center of the canvas and see
the room through it.

1961 autumn
Yoko Ono¹⁷

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¹⁵ Michael Turner, "The Poodle Dog Ornamental Bar and Vancouver's Subtracted Future", *Artspeak*, 20 January 2010, 2.

¹⁶ Charlotte Hess and Elinor Ostrom, eds., *Understanding Knowledge as a Commons: From Theory to Practice* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2005), 14. <http://site.ebrary.com/lib/ubc/Doc?id=10173555&ppg=27>

¹⁷ Yoko Ono, *Grapefruit* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2000), np.

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Selected Projects

- 98weeks** (Beirut) @ <http://98weeks.blogspot.ca/p/about-us.html>
- ART2102** (Los Angeles) @ <http://www.art2102.org/home.html>
- Banner Repeater** (London) @ <http://www.bannerrepeater.org/>
- Black Dogs** (Leeds) @ <http://www.black-dogs.org/>
- Chto delat/What is to be done?** (Petersburg) @ <http://www.chtodelat.org/>
- Cneai** (Chatou) @ <http://www.cneai.com/>
- Focal Point Gallery** (Essex) @ <http://www.focalpoint.org.uk/education/>
- Machine Project** (Los Angeles) @ <http://machineproject.com/>
- Mews Project Space** (London) @ <http://the-mews.blogspot.ca/>
- Post-Museum** (Singapore) @ <http://www.post-museum.org/about.html>
- Proboscis** (London) @ <http://proboscis.org.uk/>
- Project Space** (Vancouver) <http://projectspace.ca/blog/>
- Publication Studio** (Portland, Berkeley, Toronto, Vancouver, Boston...) @ <http://www.publicationstudio.biz/books/>
- Section 7 Books** (Paris) @ <http://www.castillocorrales.fr/section7/section7.html>
- Self Publish, Be Happy** @ <http://selfpublishbehappy.com/>
- Showroom** (London) @ <http://www.theshowroom.org/>

http://archives.library.yorku.ca/iain_baxterand_raisonne/

Temporary Services (Chicago, Copenhagen, Philadelphia) @ <http://www.temporaryservices.org/>
Triple Canopy (Brooklyn) @ <http://canopycanopycanopy.com/programs>
YU (Portland) @ <http://yucontemporary.org/>

Other Resources

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