

Marion von Osten
**Editorial – “In
Search of the
Postcapitalist
Self”**

01/07

A number of alternate, informal approaches to art and economy that arose in the Berlin of the 90s created a great deal of space and potential for rethinking relations between people, as well as possible roles for art in society. Today, however, much of this hope has since been obscured by the commercial activity and dysfunctional official art institutions most visible in the city’s art scene, and though many of the ways of living and working that were formulated in the 90s are still in practice today (not just in Berlin), many of their proponents acknowledge a feeling that the resistant, emancipatory capacities inherent to their project have since been foreclosed upon. Our interest in inviting Marion von Osten to guest-edit e-flux journal’s issue 17 had to do precisely with this widespread, prevailing sense of rapidly diminishing possibilities in the face of capitalist economy, and her extensive issue offers a broad and ambitious reformulation of how we might still rethink resistance and emancipation both within, and without capitalism – even at a time when alternate economies move ever nearer to everyday capitalist production, and vice-versa.

– Julieta Aranda, Brian Kuan Wood, Anton Vidokle

The idea for this issue came about around a coffee table with Anton Vidokle. We were at a café in Berlin Mitte, a spot I wouldn’t usually choose for an appointment – a sign of unfriendly changes in the city. Upon entering I immediately became aloof, but after a minute felt ashamed for assuming such a snobbish and unfriendly Berlin attitude, and had to ask myself how I could seriously claim to be a real Berliner in the first place – after all, for the last fourteen years, I’ve commuted almost every week to teaching jobs and projects. And most of my friends and colleagues have to organize their lives around similar routines (and there is less free will in it than the category of the “mobile class” might suggest).¹ Anyhow, moving on from these ambiguous thoughts, our conversation gave rise to some interesting afternoon dérives: the recent histories of Berlin’s leftist art collectives, and their interest in self-organization, self-publishing, electronic music, new forms of collective production, gender, postcolonial, and urban theory, as well as resistance and action against the monstrous reconstruction of Berlin in the 1990s, and the history of the Berlin Biennale as a marketing strategy for the city.² We also reflected on the widespread university protests in Europe and the resistance to the implementation of the EU border regime, and the need for cultural institutions to find alternate means of establishing the grounds for more lasting forms of cultural production, education, and research beyond the “Become Bologna” and

e-flux journal #17 — june-august 2010 | Marion von Osten
Editorial – “In Search of the Postcapitalist Self”

“Be Creative” imperatives.³ How can we find the finances and collective energy to begin this work immediately, while still placed at the center of so many contradictions? Finally, my own interest in contemporary feminist economists’ engagement with new political imaginaries prompted the question of whether it would be possible to rethink contemporary and historical leftist cultural projects beyond the neoliberal horizon, and more specifically in relation to postcapitalist and postidentitarian politics.

This last shift in perspective gave rise to this guest-edited issue of *e-flux journal*, which can be understood as the beginning of a debate that asks whether the (cultural) Left is still capable of thinking and acting beyond the analysis of overwhelming power structures or working *within* the neoliberal consensus model. What would such thinking beyond the existing critical parameters disclose and demand? Wouldn’t it call for spaces of negotiation and confrontation rather than of affirmation, cynicism, and flight? With the encouragement of the journal editors, I have invited artists, cultural producers, and theorists whom I know to be reflecting on these concerns, but who mostly have not articulated their thoughts publicly or alongside similar concerns; and yet, as readers will find, the authors provide few easy answers to the above questions – and conflicts resulting from alternate views and practices cannot be easily ignored. Rather than follow the exhausted master narratives of capitalism and crisis, this issue of *e-flux journal* investigates how cultural producers are already in the process of creating and reflecting new discourses and practices in the current climate of zombie neoliberalism. And what is disclosed and what changes if cultural production can be imagined precisely from the vantage point of postcapitalist politics?

Decentering Economy

For over thirty years, feminist economists, cultural scientists, and artists have argued convincingly against totalizing and essentializing views of capitalist economies. Feminist economists warned that describing capitalism as a self-perpetuating structure – with its ongoing need for crisis, renovation, and so forth – ignores on the one hand the heterogeneity of multiple economies, including household activities and pre- or postcapitalist economies, already existing inside Western and non-Western contexts alike. On the other hand, the anti-capitalist tradition tends to underestimate the problems of social asymmetries and gender and ethnic segregation occurring in formal and informal contexts due to patriarchy, discourses of modernization, and capitalism itself. Mainstream economists and critics have

offhandedly referred to these contradictions as mere “side-effects” of capitalism, and with this same argument the traditional anti-capitalist stance has been to disregard historically sexist and racist forms of suppression – and even of non-capitalist economies – in Western societies and the global South alike.

These popular positions seem to understand capitalism as a

dynamic, powerful, mobilizing, penetrating force, which is everywhere, driving societal and historical change. Capital is the structure of the world economy. It is the global logic. The capitalist economy is a “system” spanning the globe, integrating “first” and “third” worlds. . . . For, compared with capitalism, other modes of production are always less efficient, less dynamic, less productive. They are always found *lacking*.⁴

Thus, neither the limits, situatedness, and contextuality, nor the Eurocentrism of the very concept of capitalism – its politics and techniques – are usually examined as constructions. As a result, the existence of new, transnational solidarities and postidentitarian political subjectivities are underestimated as minor sideshows of the real thing, which necessarily remains capitalism as it is practiced by Western economies. The deconstruction of this ontological basis for economic discourse has been at the center of the work of feminist economists in the last decades.⁵

Moreover, feminism itself constituted a global movement that did not need to form global institutions or parties in order to be politically influential.⁶ The feminist understanding that “the personal is political” has fostered ways of living that have opened up a variety of politics of becoming and has given rise to an understanding of the common or communal that is not fixed by sameness or homogeneity, by a singular identity such as “we women” – demonstrated by how conflicts between black, socialist, queer, and mainstream feminisms have served to strengthen the movement as a whole. This suggests the possibility that, in diverse social and economic conditions, among people living in vastly different places, without even sharing the same set of beliefs but actively sharing the experience of patriarchy, the goal of destabilizing the patriarchal system remains very much central. Today these views are also informed and enlarged by several postcolonial projects of decentering, such as “Provincializing Europe,” as Dipesh Chakrabarty, historian and member of the famous subaltern studies group, proposes through the title of one of his books, or the

02/07

e-flux journal #17 — June-August 2010 | Marion von Osten
Editorial – “In Search of the Postcapitalist Self”

acknowledgment of the constitutive power of new political publics created by subaltern actors, experts, economies, and knowledges, as found in the cultural anthropologist Arjun Appadurai's article "Deep Democracy".⁷

Change from Within

Though this issue of *e-flux journal* is in search for a postcapitalist perspective without supposing that we already have access to it, it aims to offer a foundation for insights that challenge the common conception that in late or "cognitive" capitalism, all activities at work and in one's spare time are subordinate to capitalist accumulation and ultimately lead to commodification. This is an assumption that has disqualified every alternative move dedicated to social communication and political change as bound to become complicit with neoliberal powers or a stimulus for the next wave of capitalist accumulation. But the foundation of the anti-capitalist position remains of course capitalism itself – even though critics must concede that "good old capitalism" is no longer totally identical with itself, or that possibly even "the end of capitalism (as we knew it)" has come, as emphasized by the feminist authors collective J. K. Gibson-Graham.⁸ Moreover, the concepts of the "social factory" and of "biopolitical labor," discussed by Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt, have significantly influenced contemporary discourses surrounding social, political, and economic issues. But according to the authors of *Empire*, and as opposed to many interpretations, biopolitical labor creates not only material and immaterial goods, but also social conditions – and thereby social life itself. In this way, the production of social conditions must necessarily include possible grounds for change. According to Negri and Hardt, the term "biopolitical" indicates that the traditional distinctions between the economic, the political, the social, and the cultural have become increasingly blurred.⁹ In their analysis, they highlight the emergence of multiple forms of critique and practice as well as that of a "multitude" of singularities with the potential to provoke transformations. Their ideas have proven highly relevant in the fields of art and culture as well, since their theses – and many similar ones have been advanced by other authors this past decade – have maintained that culture increasingly operates within the political arena.¹⁰ But what is it that cultural production is capable of producing? What kind of political imaginaries does it help to constitute? How can cultural production act in relation to the productions of its time and change them from within, as Walter Benjamin asked ninety years ago?¹¹

As Italian economist Massimo de Angelis argues, capital accumulation

must attend to the needs of a variety of social actors and groups, and at the same time make sure that these needs, desires, and value practices, manifesting themselves in terms of struggles, do not break away from its ordering principles, but, on the contrary, become moments of its reproduction.¹²

This contestation has two possible ends: the first is, as De Angelis clarifies, that social cooperation – which, as social beings, we cannot avoid – including the creation of sociality at work and in the home and in all forms of cultural or activist knowledge-production, becomes an alien force under the laws of market competition; the other is – as he argues in his conversation with the editorial collective of *An Architektur* in this issue – that the very fact that we are social beings, that we possess an ability to produce commonness, and not only common goods, needs to be understood as a contradiction within capitalism's own relations of production, especially as this relates to its need for enclosure and scarcity.¹³ The central question then would concern not only how we might change the conditions of production and redistribution in their existing forms (with more state intervention or less), but how it is possible to reclaim the relations of production themselves – to change them from within, to redirect and to occupy the "social factory." A problem that is usually brought up at this point is that the social factory, as the dominant contemporary form of the relations of production, does not appear to have a clear spatial or social boundary, and therefore seems unable to provide the same conditions for a common political movement. This is usually understood as a loss.

In Common

Some of this issue's contributors propose instead a new concept of the common and of the communal (with reference to the writings of Jean Luc Nancy and of Deleuze and Guattari) and engage with an idea of "becoming common" or "being-in-common" versus the idea of community as an identitarian and homogenous group.¹⁴ Heterogeneous, conflicting, and intertwined forms of connectivity and commonness are consciously placed against governmental techniques that categorize and fix social groups. The further question of whether these practices are simply a theoretical or representational exercise or indicative of a fundamental political dimension of its own is debated here in articles that engage with the

03/07

e-flux journal #17 — june-august 2010 | Marion von Osten
Editorial — "In Search of the Postcapitalist Self"

question of how the political is constituted in postidentitarian and transnational ways under common, but also diverse conditions. This is highly relevant in texts concerned with commonness as created by modes of precarity or precarization or the movements of migration. The invited authors propose that commonness and possible politics are constituted not just as harmonious forms of identification, but also as a process of negotiation, and in conflict and confrontation with changes in statehood and global governance, flexible border regimes, and new means of accumulating wealth. But they are constituted through transnational relations and existing, constantly emerging social bounds.¹⁵ Instead of creating new distinctions and new articulations of victimization, the concept of constituting politics focuses on what makes our being-in-common the ground for new political imaginaries that point beyond the nation-state, belonging, gender, and so forth. It is not the fictional model of the white male factory worker that forms a political subject today; due to the many social struggles and movements taking place in the world, this subject can only be a heterogeneous multitude of singular forms of experience, diverse economies, and subjectivities from diverse but concrete places.

Moreover, those that are subjected to processes of precarization and migration create strategies and tactics in their everyday life that work both against and within hegemonic structures. They are not only experts in the very contradictions inherent to relations of production and contemporary governance, but are also the producers of new relations of production and new ways of making a living, and these need to be considered alongside techniques of control and processes of recuperation. As local and mobile actors create new dimensions for postnational concepts of citizenship, new rights, and diverse economies, these efforts in effect constitute the political. Can such tactical moves then become public, political action? This question calls for an analysis of histories of ongoing struggles that have produced transversal movements within seemingly stable, Western concepts of governability. These subaltern tactics and strategies likewise call for a new language to articulate the composition of the present situation, and, at the same time, to decenter and decolonize the *common* production of knowledge.¹⁶

On Postcapitalist Politics

“Any image of society depends on the perspective one takes, and the perspective one takes influences what one sees,” summarizes Antke Engel in her revision of the writings of J. K.

Gibson-Graham.¹⁷ And the title of this issue of *e-flux journal*, “In Search of the Postcapitalist Self,” relates deeply to Gibson-Graham’s latest book, *A Postcapitalist Politics*. Their approach focuses on an emerging political imaginary that “confounds the timeworn oppositions between global and local, revolution and reform, opposition and experiment, institutional and individual transformation.” As they argue,

It is not that these paired evaluative terms are no longer useful, but that they now refer to processes that inevitably overlap and intertwine. This conceptual interpenetration is radically altering the established spatiotemporal frame of progressive politics, reconfiguring the position and role of the subject, as well as shifting the grounds for assessing the efficacy of political movements and initiatives.¹⁸

Their concept of devising different economies for a non-capitalist future concentrates on “the need for a new language of economy to widen the field of economic possibility, the self-cultivation of subjects who can desire and enact other economies, and the collaborative pursuit of economic experimentation.”¹⁹

In their most recent book, *Commonwealth*, Negri and Hardt also trace various feminist and queer approaches to subjectivation and decentering, and conclude that the production of wealth using biopolitical labor could also result in a situation in which the redistribution of “common” wealth does not end up in the hands of the rich, as has been ensured by neoliberal politics. According to *Commonwealth*, natural resources, as well as knowledge and information, are communal and shared goods.²⁰ While Gibson-Graham prefer to stress the common and communal in the present, they also look for a general perspective-change that enables postcapitalist politics to be one of subjectivation and contingency. If, as they suggest throughout their work, the economy has always acted on political, cultural, and social levels, then there is no big “other,” no abstract and totalizing capitalism outside of us: there are but acting subjects who accept and implement the telos of competition, exclusiveness, and efficiency.²¹ Thus, academic and political practice, research, socioeconomic experimentation, and cultural and artistic production are all involved in constituting the discourses and practices we live in – and the same will also counter, decenter, or queer them. Not by chance Gibson-Graham speak of *capitalisms* in the plural to mark the diversity and contextuality of the project(s).

04/07

e-flux journal #17 — june-august 2010 | Marion von Osten
Editorial – “In Search of the Postcapitalist Self”

Not Another Paradigm

For many, it might seem that cultural producers are not the most prepared to engage with these issues, that an activist approach would be more appropriate. But isn't the change in perspective, the intervention in common images and language, and the invention of a new ontological basis for decentering the common *capitalocentric* vision, already a possible ground?²² Wouldn't this call for other images and assumptions than that of a totalizing capitalism, victimhood, or the division of social groups into minorities? Wouldn't it call for forms of participation that do not remain symbolic, but would constitute new public spaces for political as well as cultural negotiation? Aren't artists' historical and current forms of self-organization, and interventions into the art system's historical division of labor, signs of a *détournement* within the actual distribution of wealth and value, whether monetary, cultural, or symbolic?²³ Couldn't the emancipatory potential of aesthetic and cultural practices be enacted here?

It is no coincidence that the contributions to this issue focus not only on the constant privatization and capitalization of urban space, but also on ideas and concrete proposals of (urban) design as an aesthetic and spatial practice integrating manual and cognitive abilities, and in such a way that merits consideration through a postcapitalist lens.²⁴ Taking this issue of *e-flux journal* as a platform for these concerns connects these debates with an international discussion, but to the extent that the issue is composed primarily of Berlin-based theorists, artists, and activists, it also asks whether the local is still relevant to these concerns. And it is likewise no coincidence that many of the contributions take the theses and proposals in Gibson-Graham's latest book as a leitmotif for a critical reading and reevaluation of *existing* postcapitalist projects and cultural practices.

It is customary to note that postcapitalist practices act in the shadow of mainstream discourses and events, and this collection of essays intends to contradict that point on many levels, serving rather as an attempt to initiate a similar discussion, but with a sense of immanence: although the present is constituted by postcapitalist practices (and politics as well), we still have to engage in the discourse and establish a new language, whether textual or visual, in order to make these practices apparent, articulated, and applicable. Therefore, this issue of *e-flux journal* will endeavor to reflect upon the presence of the political against the backdrop of contingent aesthetic, social, and economic factors. It is not a call for a telos or a proclamation of the need for a new, completely

different political design that asks, "What has to be done?" Rather, the contributions to this issue seek to promote a more empirical relationship to the presence of the political – one embedded in the genealogies of ongoing social struggles and postidentitarian subjectivity – and ask instead, "What has been done already? And how do we go on?"

Dedicated to Julie Graham

e-flux journal no. 17: *In Search of the Postcapitalist Self* is guest-edited by Marion von Osten as her contribution to the 6th Berlin Biennale.

05/07

e-flux journal #17 — june-august 2010 | Marion von Osten
Editorial – "In Search of the Postcapitalist Self"

1
A question also raised by curator Adnan Yıldız in his article “Falling into Berlin,” <http://adnanyildiz.blogspot.com/2010/01/soon.html>, May 25, 2010.

2
These local histories are reflected – due to Anton Vidokle’s awareness – in the articles of Berlin-based artists and writers Sebastian Luetgert (“Down and Out in All the Wrong Places (Berlin 2010)”), Natascha Sadr Haghghian (“What’s the Time, Mahagonny?”), and Florian Zeyfang (“A Brief History of Poor Man’s Expression”).

3
For more information, see <http://www.edu-factory.org/edu15/>.

4
William Walters, “Decentering the economy,” *Economy and Society* 28, no. 2 (May 1999): 316–317. The text is a review article of J. K. Gibson-Graham’s, *The End of Capitalism (As We Knew It): A Feminist Critique of Political Economy* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996).

5
See for example *The Strategic Silence: Gender and Economic Policy*, ed. Isabella Bakker (London: Zed Books, 1994); or *Beyond Economic Man: Feminist Theory and Economics*, ed. Marianne A. Ferber and Julie A. Nelson (Chicago: University Of Chicago Press, 2003); *Reproduktionskonten fälschen! Heterosexualität, Arbeit und Zuhause*, ed. Pauline Boudry, Brigitta Kuster, and Renate Lorenz (Berlin: b_books, 1999); idem, *Sexuell arbeiten* (Berlin: b_books, 2007).

6
See Chandra Talpade Mohanty, *Feminism Without Borders: Decolonizing Theory, Practicing Solidarity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003).

7
See Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000); Arjun Appadurai, “Deep Democracy: Urban Governmentality and the Horizon of Politics,” *Public Culture* 14, no. 1 (Winter 2002): 21–47.

8
J. K. Gibson-Graham, *The End of Capitalism (As We Knew It): A Feminist Critique of Political Economy* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996).

9
See Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000); idem, *Multitude: War and Democracy in the Age of Empire* (New York: Penguin, 2004); *Empire und die biopolitische Wende: Die internationale Diskussion im Anschluss an*

Hardt und Negri, ed. Marianne Pieper (Frankfurt am Main: Campus, 2007); *Das Phantom sucht seinen Mörder: Ein Reader zur Kulturalisierung der Ökonomie*, ed. Justin Hoffmann and Marion von Osten (Berlin: b_books, 1999).

10
See for example Michael Hardt in *Artforum*, December 2008, http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m0268/is_4_47/ai_n42419604/; or the many examples in Isabell Lorey’s article of how post-operaist thought has been negotiated in the cultural field.

11
See Walter Benjamin, “The Author as Producer,” in *Reflections: Essays, Aphorisms, Autobiographical Writings*, ed. Peter Demetz, trans. Edmund Jephcott (New York: Schocken, 1986).

12
Massimo de Angelis, *The Beginning of History: Value Struggles and Global Capital* (London: Pluto Press, 2007), 79. The chapter from which this quotation is taken is also available at <http://www.commoner.org.uk/?p=62>.

13
See An Architektur’s interview with Massimo De Angelis and Stavros Stavrides in this issue. The relation between scarcity and enclosure was also recently debated by Fahim Amir, Eva Egermann, and Peter Spillmann in the roundtable “What shall we do...?” held in Berlin and Vienna in May 2001 on the shifts in extra-institutional knowledge production in the contemporary “educational turn.” It is interesting to see how complicated it is to articulate ways out of the context in which one is enclosed.

14
See Jean-Luc Nancy, *Being Singular Plural*, trans. Robert D. Richardson and Anne E. O’Byrne (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000); Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, vol. 1 [1972.], trans. Robert Hurley, Mark Seem, and Helen R. Lane. (London and New York: Continuum, 2004).

15
See texts in this issue: Isabell Lorey, “Becoming Common: Precarization as Political Constituting,” and Manuela Boyadžijev and Serhat Karakayal?, “Recuperating the Sideshows of Capitalism: The Autonomy of Migration Today.”

16
See Walter D. Mignolo “Epistemic Disobedience, Independent Thought and De-Colonial Freedom,” *Theory, Culture, and Society* 26, nos. 7–8 (2009): 1–23.

17

See Antke Engel's article in this issue, "Desire for Economic Transformation / Desire in Economic Transformation."

18

J. K. Gibson-Graham, A
Postcapitalist Politics
(Minneapolis: University of
Minnesota Press, 2006), xix.

19

Ibid., 13.

20

Michael Hardt, Antonio Negri,
Commonwealth (Cambridge, MA:
Harvard University Press, 2009).

21

The Spanish artist Daniel Garcia
Andujar, for example, has been
engaged in the collection of
postcapitalist links and projects
in his ongoing archive,
<http://www.postcapital.org>.

22

Judith Hopf's declaration of
independence in this issue,
"Contrat entre les hommes et
l'ordinateur," can be understood
as such an act of détournement.

23

See Marion von Osten,
"Producing Publics – Making
Worlds!" in *Curating Critique*, ed.
Marianne Eigenheer, Barnaby
Drabble, and Dorothee Richter
(Frankfurt am Main: Revolver,
2007).

24

See the articles in this issue
"Hidden Labor and the Delight of
Otherness. Design and
Postcapitalist Politics" by the art
historian Tom Holert, as well as
"Design for a Post-Neoliberal
City" by the artist and architect
Jesko Fezer.

07/07

e-flux journal #17 — june-august 2010 Marion von Osten
Editorial – "In Search of the Postcapitalist Self"