

Some practices of in-between

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On 1st April 2010, the British Army launched a Defence Cultural Specialist Unit which deploys military specialists in Afghan culture and language to advise commanders on the ground in Afghanistan.

'The specialists will help build a picture of Helmandi society for commanders in Task Force Helmand and battlegroups across the province to help them identify and understand issues relating to the local cultural, political, economic, social and historical environment to help commanders make better and more informed decisions. . . . Assistant Chief of the Defence Staff (Operations) Air Vice-Marshal Andy Pulford said that a focus on cultural issues is essential to success in Afghanistan. He said: "Cultural awareness has been a weakness in the past. The unit is essential to equipping the military with a better understanding and appreciation of the region, its people and how to do business there."'¹

A *Rhyzom* research trip to a long-term art project² in Ballykinler, Co. Down, Northern Ireland included a guided tour of the British Army base which dominates the village. Whilst there we were treated to a formal presentation by a Lt.Col. of the 2nd Battalion Rifles. He spoke in broad terms about the deployment of the battalion in Afghanistan, and the extent to which they engage with 'the human terrain'. His account of their work engaging with complex local cultures in order to operate, (similar to that outlined in extract above), bore a striking resemblance to the contemporary discourse of socially engaged art and architectural practice. Perhaps this should come as no surprise. While the methods, tools and forms of knowledge inherited from 'community arts' were developed to support culturally marginalised people in their demands for cultural democracy, knowledge can be adapted for any purpose. That those tools are now being used by military strategists seeking tactical advantage in a situation of occupation is only to be expected. Every cultural production has the capacity to double as a Trojan Horse.

Global relations are largely based on the flows of capital, backed by military force as required. Hardt and Negri call this 'Empire', "*a system of power so deep and complex that we can no longer determine specific difference or measure*".³ By operating beyond any detectable horizon, this system of power leaves virtually no outside from which an alternative might be constructed⁴. The example of the British Army above demonstrates how even 'alternatives' can be co-opted and put to use by hegemonic forces for coercive purposes. Under these circumstances, how is the relentless march of Capital to be non-violently or creatively opposed?

In seeking change which is not just a subversion or negation of what already exists, Brian Massumi points to the need to engage 'with the unfounded and unmediated in-between of becoming'.⁵ The idea of in-between as a condition under which properties of resistance can emerge is one that I want to consider, particularly how a 'resistant in-between' constitutes and is constituted by a number of architectural and art-related practices operating at the current moment⁶. These practices are not defined in relation to any central point or ideology – they are themselves immanent experiments, with their own theoretical positions. They are not empty experimental forms, but incorporate skilful approaches to living and when viewed in combination they seem to describe a pragmatics of transformation.

Art's privileged position within the symbolic order has long been used (and abused) to lend enhanced visibility to all kinds of social and political processes. The status of art demands a distinction between art and the real which secures the symbolic and exchange value of art, but at the cost of reducing its political effectiveness. This segregation of art from the real has a limited value for current practices engaging with the in-between as a site of production: they reject such binaries, shifting between action and representation without anxiety, generating use value or symbolic value as needed. These practices construct situations, events and images in response to selected local conditions, producing or mobilising spaces in-between where people can identify,

and sometimes act upon, points of possible transformation in their own lived realities. They share an orientation towards a social which is part of a complex system of relations that includes the non-human – the virtual, the spatial, the biological, the agricultural, the technological, the terrestrial, the animal etc.

*This is Not a Trojan Horse*⁷ is a recent work by Futurefarmers, a group of artists and designers who have been working together since 1995. The work takes the form of a large, human-powered, wooden horse, designed with architect Lode Vranken and built at Pollinaria (an organic farm and artist residency programme in Italy). On a ten-day tour through the region of Abruzzo in Italy, this nomadic architectural form became “a physical space with moving edges . . . a vehicle for social and material exchange at a pivotal moment in this region.”⁸ En route, it collected “traces of rural practices; seeds, tools and products to enliven the imaginations of farmers through discourse, artistic production and to parade their truths to power.”⁹ The project specifically alludes to the in-between as a place of connection between people and places, not presupposing any existing community but creating space for new forms of social interaction. By drawing on ‘the network’ rather than ‘the community’ as a model, *This is Not a Trojan Horse* avoids stereotypical accounts of rural as fixed places of tradition and stability, emphasising creative, knowledge-based practices of working land and producing food.

The work moves beyond an increasingly common tendency towards romantic documentation of ‘the rural’ through its sub-title – “Incarnating Nomadic Resistance Against Biopolitics (the discourse of traditional power)”. Biopolitics is largely associated with human life, although Nicole Shukin argues that human social life cannot be ‘abstracted from the non-human lives of others (the domain of zoopolitics)’.¹⁰ While this is contentious, it is clear that biopolitical conditions extend beyond the human, and that by calling upon this discourse, the work of Futurefarmers introduces a non-anthropocentric dimension into their considerations of environmental realities. The three registers of ecology – environment, social system and human subjectivity – which Felix Guattari articulated¹¹ are not separable in practice.

Futurefarmers is a hybrid network, drawing people together from a number of fields and disciplines in the construction of spaces and events which respond to the local conditions of a given context or situation. Its productions are collective assemblages that work towards the creation of commonality and/or commons. In opposition to current economic and political structures, which render the natural world and all of its inhabitants as resources from which profit can be extracted, practices that engage with the in-between operate contrary to forms of enclosure. In some cases this involves documenting and understanding mechanisms of enclosure, in others it is about developing counter-strategies, carrying out or documenting contrary actions. It can be a way of modelling or producing commons, or opening a space for discussions of what is common, including whether or not the commons is restricted to humans. The in-between is what is not (yet) owned, or what can still be made common.

A creative and intellectual commons movement is already well developed: the concept of information sharing and open source predates computer technology, and its principles extend well beyond the free software movement. There is talk of an ‘emerging commons paradigm’,¹² manifesting as local resistance to the politics of water, to the corporatisation of natural resources, to the enclosure of public space, the privatisation of the internet etc. However, anti-commons is a powerful force. The internationally influential US Patent system, which issues 3,500 patents a week, generally favours the rights of property over those of common interest, with little non-patentee input into policy or decisions¹³. In the 1980’s, when the patenting of biological matter was legalised in the US, the huge economic potential of biodiversity and related traditional knowledge led to rampant bio-prospecting (or biopiracy as it’s known to its opponents), with patents on living matter extending to thousands. The simple act of seed-saving is now a potential criminal act in many parts of the world. Even for those who are not interested in biodiversity, these developments shed light on the knowledge economy as a mechanism of enclosure. Anti-commons exposes Capital at its most voracious.

HURL (Home University Roscommon Leitrim) is “Ireland’s newest university”, formed in 2009 in rural north-west Ireland by a multidisciplinary group of individuals committed to the ‘exchange of soft knowledge’¹⁴. HURL does not commodify knowledge, but seeks to facilitate its transfer from person to person, placing an equal value on abstract knowledge and know-how. The model of education proposed by HURL identifies every

private or public space as a potential place of dynamic knowledge exchange. This transmedial practice operates both inside and outside the space of art, using forms of assembly that are real and virtual.

HURL invites others to create their own version of Home University, working towards the establishment of a Home University network. By acting in common with others, this and other practices in-between find ways of generating and sharing knowledge, ideas and productions across time and space, involving fluid sets of actors and incorporating lived and sensed experiences. They engage with issues, sites and groups of people that are 'local', but they operate within a trans-local condition so that there is no fixing of place or community identity but an opening up to *displacement*. Arising from the productive tension of local / global, displacement allows new narratives and thought forms to be assembled from previously limiting binaries such as local/global, rural/urban, tradition/innovation, knowledge/imagination, human/ non-human etc.

The Herbologies/Foraging Networks recently emerged from the Baltic region, initially from Finland and the Kurzeme region of Latvia. Composed of a transnational group of practitioners, operating across multiple platforms, it explores the cultural traditions and knowledge of herbs, edible and medicinal plants through events and workshops, placing that information within the context of online networks, open information-sharing and biological technologies.

"Herbologies refers to the different ways of knowing about plants and their extracts (as well as sometimes fungus and bee products), as wild and cultivated food, medicine and related crafts. Foraging Networks raises awareness of organised behaviours and practices in gathering wild food, potential networked actions in micro to macro ecosystems or socio-political levels. The slash in the project name indicates the uneasily-reduced connection between cultural knowledge, social practice and extended resources in these subjects. Combining with the fields of social/visual arts, craft, cultural heritage, media, network cultures and technology, the programme has directed attention to the different ways of sharing knowledge, especially within the Baltic Sea region and between different generations. Furthermore, it has also been initiated from the position of 'not-knowing', and being an immigrant to a landscape and environmental habitat."¹⁵

Situating knowledge of the edible qualities and useful properties of wild plants within a cultural commons, along with aesthetically inclined ways of knowing, or know-how; "how to gather, how to prepare, how to use, reflections on use and how such knowledge is learned",¹⁶ *Herbologies/ Foraging Networks* responds to a developing interest in sustainable food production, and forges a trans-generational link between traditional knowledge and innovation that can be reproduced in multiple localities.

Practices engaging with the in-between as a site of production, including many not mentioned in this text, might be described as forms of action-research in the way that they combine deceptively simple actions with multifaceted inquiries into the working of things. They are collective productions; they are neighbourhood events. They are assemblages of human, non-human, material and immaterial forms; they are art and farming projects. They are hybrid networks of culture, nature, science, discourse and technology; they are communal gardens and discussion groups.

Forms of attention lie at the heart of aesthetics, and these practices employ the embodied inquiry of aesthetics to consider both what is, and what is emerging. In so far as they place an emphasis on skilful living, as opposed to competitive advantage, they function as nodes for the emergence of possible change.

Fiona Woods, 2010

- ¹ British Army website, <http://www.army.mod.uk/news/20420.aspx> accessed August 2010
- ² The artist Anne-Marie Dillon has spent a number of years working with micro-communities of interest in the village of Ballykinler which owes its existence to, but has a complicated relationship with, the local British Army base.
- ³ Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire*, New York: Harvard University Press, 2000, pp 210 – 211
- ⁴ This is of course debatable, particularly in relation to the question of whether the challenge to ‘Western Capitalism’ posed by Islamic Fundamentalism constitutes an ‘outside’ or only an inversion.
- ⁵ Brian Massumi, ‘The Autonomy of Affect’, in Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation*, Durham: Duke University Press, 2002, p 31
- ⁶ The reference to practices located ‘in-between’ first came to my attention in relation to the work of aaa in ‘How to make a community as well as the space for it’ by Doina Petrescu in *Space Shuttle*, eds. Peter Mutschler and Ruth Morrow, Belfast, 2007. Also available on <http://www.re-public.gr/en/?p=60>, accessed August 2010
- ⁷ Futurefarmers, *This is Not a Trojan Horse* <http://www.futurefarmers.com/thisisnotatrojanhorse/about.html> accessed August 2010
- ⁸ <http://www.futurefarmers.com/thisisnotatrojanhorse/about.html>
- ⁹ <http://www.futurefarmers.com/thisisnotatrojanhorse/about.html>
- ¹⁰ Nicole Shukin, *Animal Capital: Rendering life in biopolitical times*, University of Minnesota Press, 2009, p 9
- ¹¹ Felix Guattari, *Les Trois Écologies*, partial translation by Chris Turner, 1989, Paris: Galilee: full translation by Ian Pindar and Paul Sutton, London: The Athlone Press, 2000
- ¹² On the Commons website - ‘About the Commons’ <http://onthecommons.org/about-commons> , accessed August 2010
- ¹³ For further details see The Public Patent Foundation website <http://www.pubpat.org/About.htm> , accessed August 2010
- ¹⁴ Home University of Roscommon and Leitrim website, <http://hurlllearning.wordpress.com/> accessed August 2010
- ¹⁵ Andrew Gryf Patterson, ‘Introduction in English’, Herbologies/Foraging Networks website <http://herbologies-foraging.net/about/introduction-english> accessed August 2010
- ¹⁶ Gryf Patterson, Introduction, <http://herbologies-foraging.net>