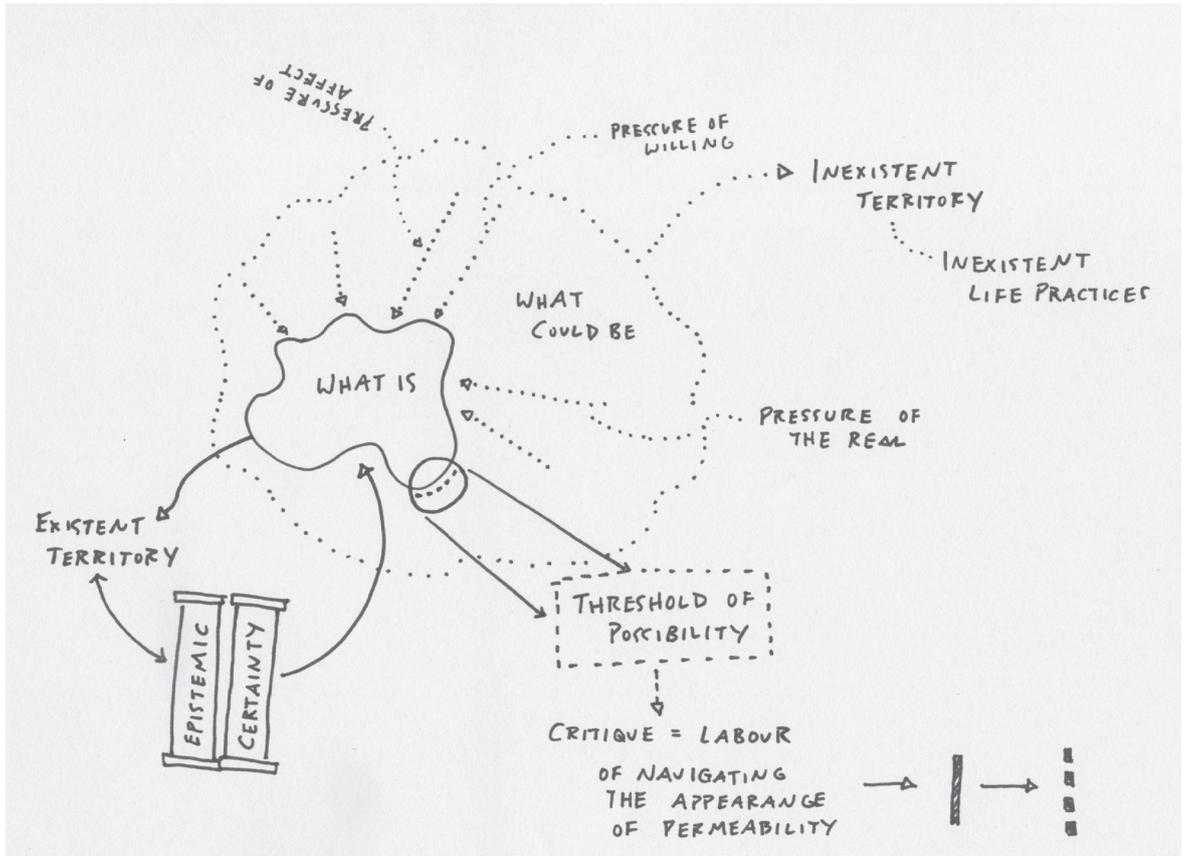
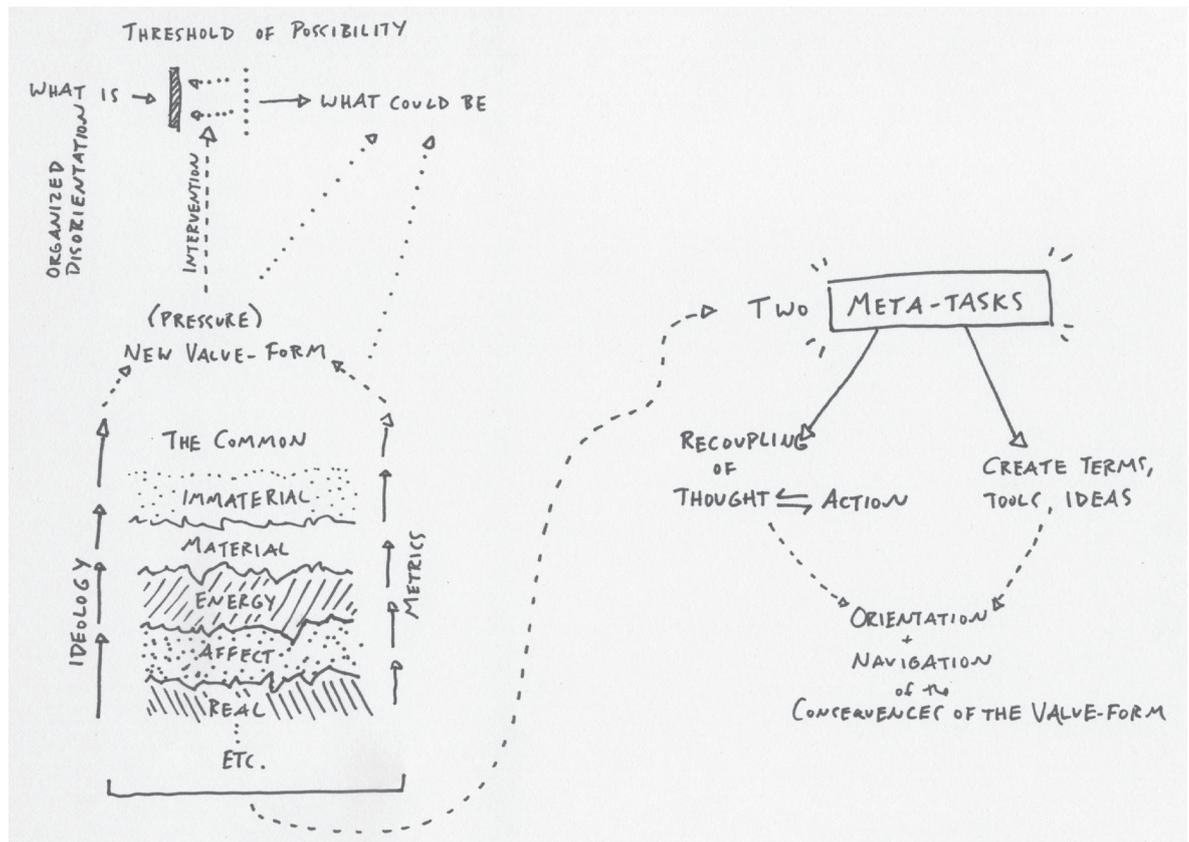


Diagramming the Common

Patricia Reed



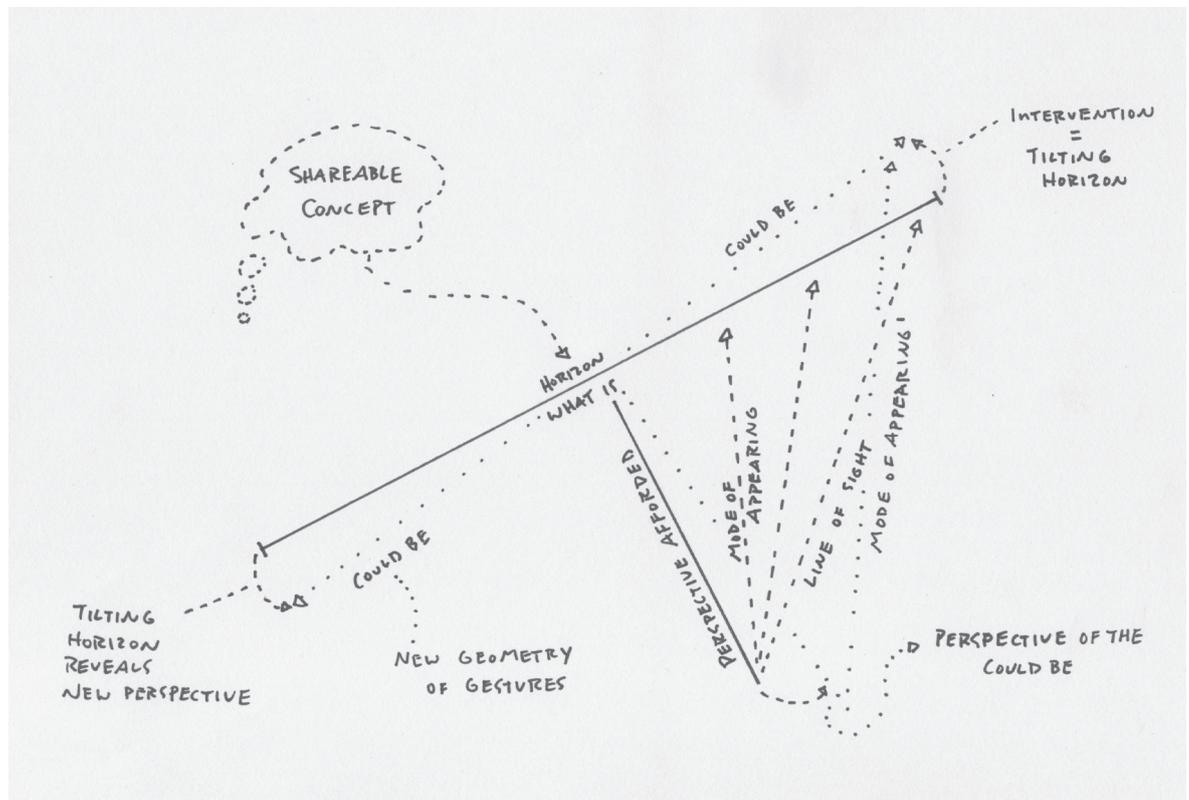
We are gathered here tonight under the discursive umbrella of “the Common” and what that might mean in terms of general uses and resources for art production. The gathering is staged as a micro-environment, as a testing site for the experimental creation of a model of artistic practice with arguably larger, macro ambitions in mind, namely the ‘commoning’ of socio-economic relations at large. Since this project proclaims a degree of criticality, let us situate it firstly as an affirmative gesture in subtracting critique from its current predicament in art and academia that often amounts to a stagnating, doomsday diagnoses or hierarchical ‘knowing better’, in securing positions of didactic expertise. If this project of ‘commoning’ is to take on ‘useful’ import it starts to resemble the more constructive notion of critique discussed by Foucault where critique is equal to the ‘art’ of creating conditions for other life practices to emerge. The former mode of critique seems content to stop at the identification of epistemic impasses, or system illogic; whereas the latter *charts out spaces* where alternative modes of life can be formed as a constructive adaptation or commitment to the recognition of those impasses. With this in mind, the labour of critique becomes a labour of navigation, a plotting out of speculative trajectories *for* inexistent territories. This is the navigation of what *could be* in the face of *what is*, for *what is* demarcates a zone of epistemic certainty that supports a particular logic of the world, foreclosing on alternative structural possibilities. Navigating the *could be* requires the creation of a diagramme for the inexistent, it is the articulation of a new territory of logic unbound to the actual imperatives of the current landscape whose coordinates seem to have calcified our very imaginations, to the exception of cataclysmic narratives.



I. The Stakes of Commoning

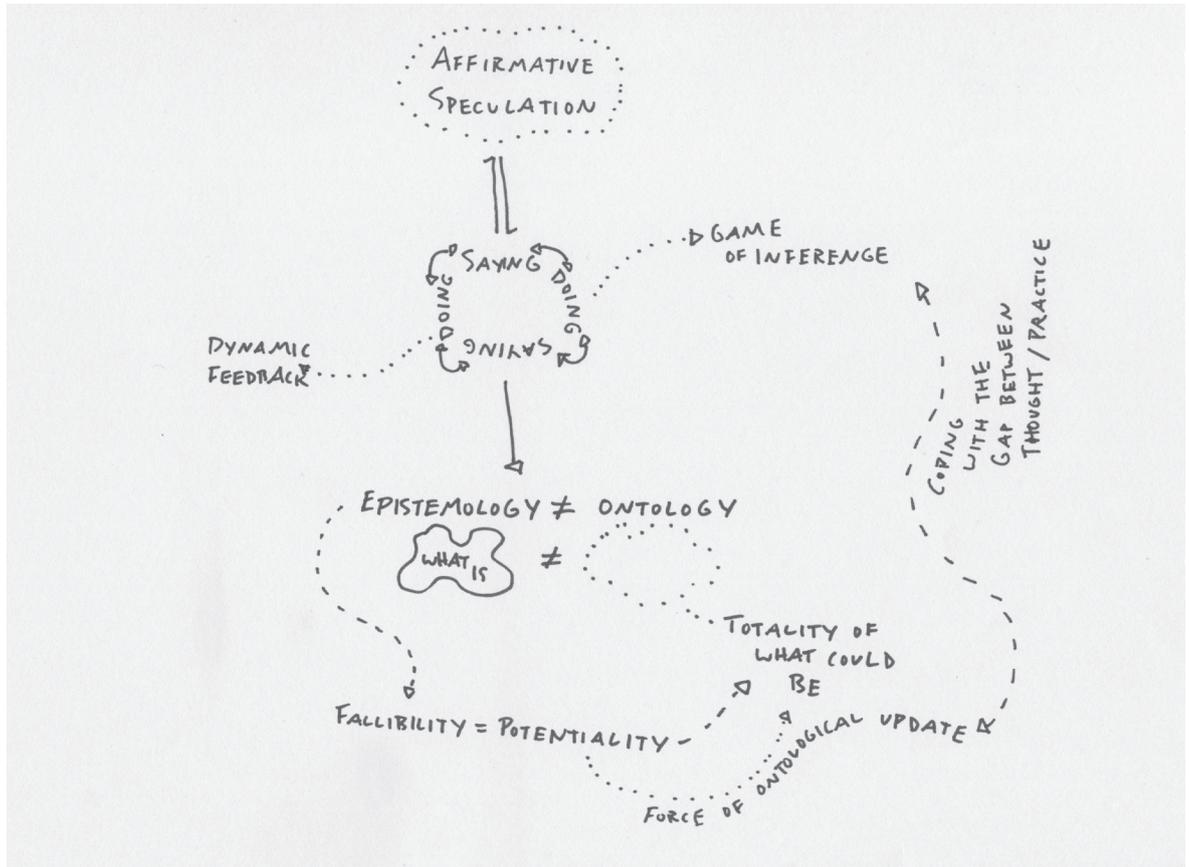
To enact the common, to *fabulate* a territory for the practicing of forms of life afforded by commoning, can come by no other way than by reengineering the value-form. In a period where we have been inhabiting the ongoing and ever morphing topology of the neoliberal revolution, the terrain has been stretched, pulled and twisted in ever liquid-mercurial configurations, unbroken by objective failings and undelivered promises of the model. The unruptured sturdiness of this plastic topology, in the face of increasing epistemic impasses, has left us caught in an ideological spiral, all the more since this topology based on competitive market-efficiency declares itself free of ideology tout court. Far surpassing Marx's dictum on ideology that says "they do not know it, but they are doing it", Zizek's updated version in times of functional cynicism of "they know it, but they are doing it anyway" is far more pervasive since it renders the potential relation of knowledge and action fundamentally impotent. In Marx's understanding of ideology, there is a potential space to acquire knowledge in the reshaping of action (if they would know it, maybe they would do it differently), yet in Zizek's version that potential space of agency has been seemingly dissolved, so what ultimately remains is the decoupling of thought and action. This meta-crisis between thinking and doing leaves us in a state of disorientation, a space of pure reflex, where we feel compelled to act, but have no sense of orientation as to how we may act successfully to overcome the impasses endemic to what we know. What Badiou has called 'organized disorientation', this meta-crisis thrives on a certain disavowal of knowledge, where we don't believe in what we know, and so what we know carries inconsequential bearings on our actions. A reengineering of the value-form in the project of commoning is therefore as much a task of constructing ideological and metric strategies to forge a new territory of socio-object-umwelt relations, composed of the nested complexity

between the material (objects and stuff), the immaterial (energy, movement, affect); the real and the semiotic. This, as yet, inexistent territory of the *could be*, faces a rather Promethean challenge to recouple thought and action, knowledge and belief in said knowledge, where the real of ongoing epistemic differentiation can pierce through and render permeable the existent neoliberal topos.



We need a new cartography for this speculative, inexistent territory of commoning if we are to regain a sense of orientation, the instantiation of a new horizon that may incline us in logical and affective directions. This horizon, as Gilles Chatelet notes, whether figured spatially or with regards to knowledge, is not “a boundary marker that prohibits or solicits transgression, nor a barrier drawn in a dotted line across the sky. Once it has been decided, one always carries one’s horizon away with one. This is the exasperating side of the horizon: corrosive like the visible, tenacious like a smell, compromising like touch, it does not dress things up with appearances, but impregnates everything that we are resolved to grasp”.¹ This horizon is equal parts spatial, affective, relational and geometric – it can be owned by no one, but possessed by anyone. Possession is *hexis*, it is not ownership, but a state of mind as well as a power of use through practice – like the quality inherent to language and culture, this horizon knows no property of scarcity, but gains value through imitation, shareability and repetition of use. In plotting out an experimental, speculative territory for commoning this horizon must be rendered shareable, with a force of imitative inclination towards the construction of this inexistent territory. The creation of a new territory subtended by a logic of ‘commoning’ is ultimately the creation of and commitment to new norms, norms that are open to revision and are never permanent, but norms of practice that outline temporary boundary conditions of activity.

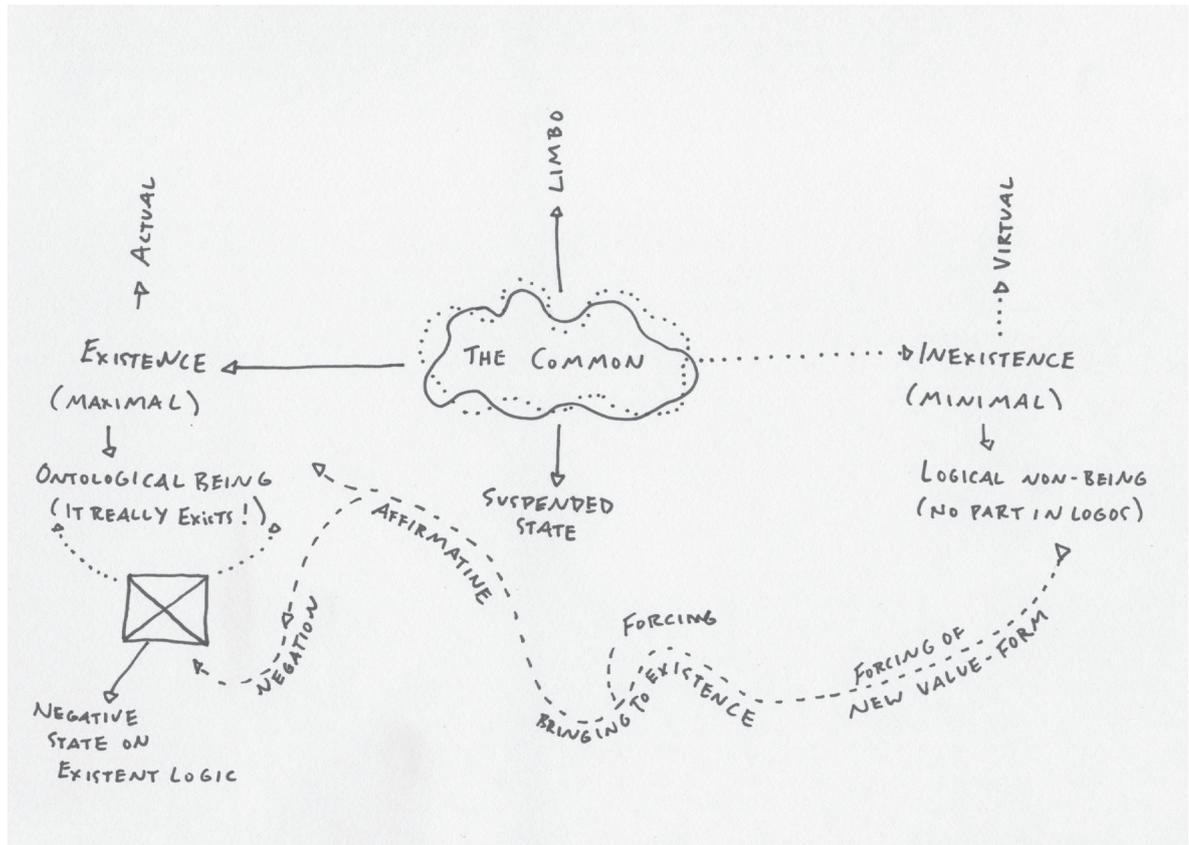
1. Gilles Châtelet, *Figuring Space: Philosophy, Mathematics and Physics*, trans. Robert Shore and Muriel Zagha (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishing, 2000), 54.



Since we cannot know of this inexistent territory of the common, it is entirely speculative – we cannot map with the precision of GPS a territory that has yet to find a surface or milieu upon which and through which to act. What has become tainted by finance and the rent economy, the power of the term ‘speculation’ needs to be reappropriated. Historically speaking, to speculate is to cognitively ponder the future, it is an imaginative power not to be underestimated. Speculation is always an attempt to incline the future into the present – grammatically speaking, speculation is by necessity, a virtual and actual temporality where the prognostication of future events is woven, or forced back upon the present. As noted by Uncertain Commons, an anonymous collective of writers, the cognitive potentiality of speculation has absolutely collapsed into the economic realm since the end of the eighteenth century, where speculation was definitely ripped from the domain of imagination and locked into the drive for market prediction and profits. Such a collapse carries an almost libidinal drive to secure the future along the trajectory of profit, a privatized future, to the neglect of any potential remainder. It is a violent gesture of absolutizing potential, divorcing the future from uncertain anticipation. Given the advances of fictionalized late-capitalism in our current plight, our future has been absolutized into an economic certainty of debt. Considering the current, captured status of the term speculation, Uncertain Commons have specified it into two categories: Firmative Speculation and Affirmative Speculation.² The firmative mode (largely described above) seeks to pin down, constrain, and enclose the future – its thrust is to make the future definitive and manageable, embodied most evidently in the proliferation of risk and probability calculus. Affirmative speculation is equally the production of a future, yet it is to seize upon uncertainty as a mechanism of potential bifurcation or rupture, rather than utter containment or foreclosure on the scope of potential. Affirmative speculation is not simply a leap of faith into the unknown, it does not deny conjecture or futural assessments that generate useful data and epistemic advances, but it

2. Uncertain Commons, *Speculate This!* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2013).

directly engages the potential of uncertainty without totalizing it along prefigured pathways, it is responsive to bifurcation and untested points of orientation. Firmative speculation allows for no updating of territorial norms, it denies the possible laceration of the given topos by the real, whereas affirmative speculation is distinctly a commitment to the fabrication of new norms in response to the potential of bifurcation, and the new territories of relation such a bifurcation may condition.



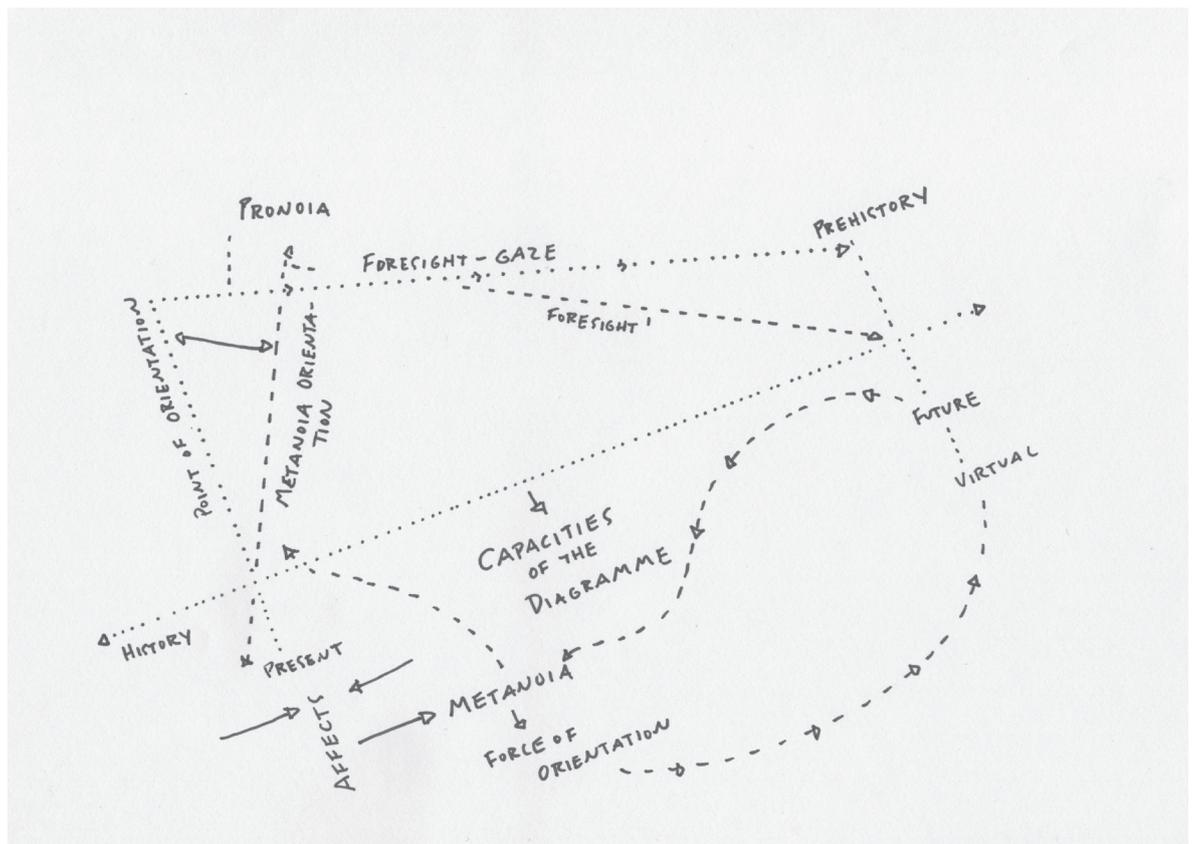
Affirmative speculation affords the call for norm revisionism Reza Negarestani has outlined in “The Labour of the Inhuman”³, predicated as it is on a recursive interplay between saying and doing, doing and saying. A part of his larger project of rationalist universalism – which it could be argued places perhaps too much faith in human reason – nonetheless displays important characteristics that may help in coping with the current decoupling of thought and action. Negarestani describes this recursive behaviour as a game of practicing inference, where the taking as true in thought (belief) and the making-true through acting (agency) are constantly tested against one another and gauged in dynamic feedback. In such a labour it should be mentioned, the fallibility of epistemology is not a glitch or failure, but is inscribed as a mode of potentiality for ‘updating’ behaviour. Important is that in such a system epistemology does not overdetermine ontology, or put more plainly, a system where what is currently known does not constitute the totality of what may exist, or what could be. The firmative mode of speculation sees epistemic fallibility as something to be contained and minimized, often described as a mere glitch in a generally well functioning, or ‘least-bad’ system, since it puts all it’s eggs in an ontological basket of what is, to the disavowal of evidential reality that suggests otherwise and that could incline us towards what could be. Firmative speculation does not want to engage

3. Reza Negarestani, “The Labor of the Inhuman” in *e-flux Journal* #52, February, 2014 <http://www.e-flux.com/journal/the-labor-of-the-inhuman-part-i-human/> (accessed September 2014).

with epistemic discrepancies that would disrupt or dismantle its ontological topos. The affirmative mode of speculation is the revisionary labour of de/re-ontologizing responsive to fluctuating epistemic conditions and novel environmental affordances. It is in this affirmative register of speculating that the common may resuscitate an imaginative force of speculation separate from the ubiquity of competitive profit gains, responsive to the situational and environmental real that will eventually rupture our symbolic, material and biological existence whether we decide to acknowledge it or not. In this light and in the face of overwhelming epistemological evidence and projection, the project of commoning can be apprehended not only as an ethical reorientation, but also as a realist one that must not only conceive of new modes of value creation and distribution, but must expand its ontological purview beyond anthropocentric horizons where our surroundings are no longer taken as a neutral backdrop upon which we humans have ultimate decideability.

II. Formalisation of the Common

I would like to suggest the diagramme as a preliminary tool in the project of the common. Diagrammes are a kind of prosthesis of thought, a vehicle for thought outside the containment of what is, organizing the construction of inexistent horizons in the restaging of geometrical space and the types of relations afforded by that new perspective. As Chatelet notes, diagrammes are ‘technologies that mediate other technologies of writing’.⁴ Diagrammes, furthermore, map out a space of intuition and inference, they project virtuality onto the space they not only represent, but seek to construct. Diagrammes are both descriptive and prescriptive, conditioning an affective shareability in a semi-linguistic form that open up a cognitive territory for the epistemic acceleration of a new dimension.



4. Gilles Châtelet, *Figuring Space: Philosophy, Mathematics and Physics*, XVIII.

The quality of virtuality endemic to the diagramme as form is inherent to the project of commoning in and of itself. Let me explain. When we understand the virtual as some sort of latent potentiality located in the Umwelt of the actual (and not something requiring absolute invention from zero), the common is already very much alive and well, taking on potency in idea and labour-practice within our current socio-economic situation, subtended as it is on the circulation of information. The debate on the common, especially under our communicative capitalist turn, is not whether we need to usher it into existence, but if we can actualize its virtual force through terms of evaluation and value-extraction beyond models underwritten by principles of monopolization. The actualization of virtual potentiality is synonymous with the creation of an ‘inexistent territory’ described throughout this talk. In the parlance of Badiou, the inexistent indicates a ‘degree of minimal existence approaching zero’ and not absolute inexistence.⁵ Women’s Suffrage is a clear example of this inexistent/existent relationship where women have, of course, existed as persons since the beginning of the human, but whose legal status as a citizen-participant in the polis carried a minimal, near zero-degree existence, so women in my hometown of Montreal existed pre-1918, but inexisted with regard to the civic right to vote. Crucial to this idea of the inexistent, is that it requires a politics of appearing that can name and index this inexistence calling attention to the part with no part in a given system of ordering. The inexistent is something that remains in limbo between ontological being (it really exists) and logical non-being (it has no part or participation in the reasoning or logos of the system). In the case of the common, what we can say is that it exists (ontologically) as a mechanism of production and networked labour, but inexists (logically) with regards to a political determination concerning the evaluation of its own value production. The bringing into logical or maximal existence of the common is a process of intensification by way of reengineering the value-form; it is also and equally the destruction of that former logic legitimating the inexistence of the common in the first place. In this way, the construction of a diagramme for the common is both an affirmative speculation upon appearance of a novel value-form and its attendant, normative consequences, as well as the negation of a system of logic that denies it’s coming into proper existence.

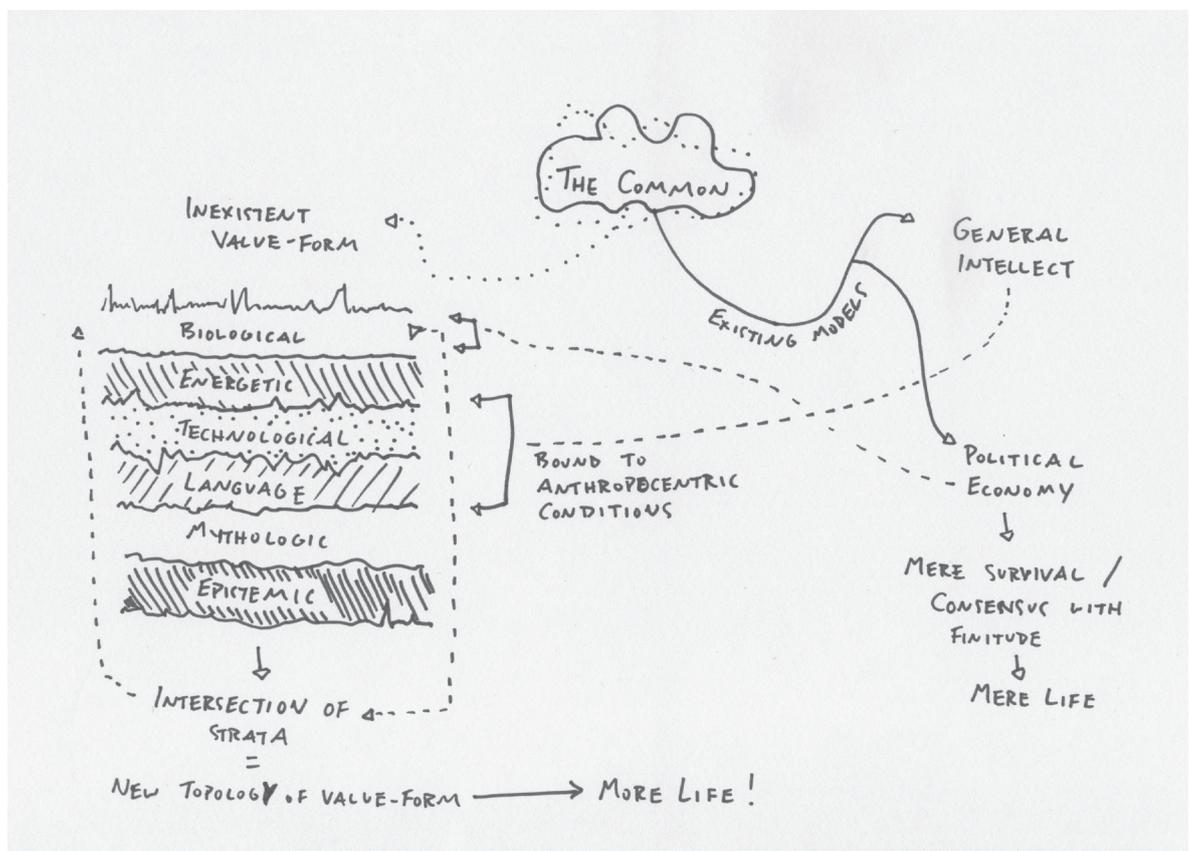
This quality of affirmative-negation or constructive-deconstruction is anchored to the very core of diagramming. The root verb of diagramming means not only something that is plotted, sketched out or rendered into figures, but also indicates a crossing out or the erasure of figures. As a tool of thought, the activity of diagramming invites the fabulation of narrative, it is an abstract language where gestures of ‘pre-history’ find a site for speculative definition. The diagramme is not bound to the elaboration of an axiomatic argument, but, as Deleuze suggests, can gaze into the future with *pronoia* or foresight, constructing a reality that is yet to come, like the diagramme of the Panopticon and it’s foresight of modern techniques of power.⁶

One, could of course, construct diagrammes for anything or any future scenario, so the issue concerning the diagramme is not merely that it has a capacity to gaze into the future, but how that projected future comes to existence. The temporality of affirmative speculation as we may recall, is a recursive one with feedback between the actual and virtual, the future and the present. It is because of this looping temporal structure where the intervention of affect and ideas is paramount, since they constructs points of orientation. What I am suggesting is that

5. Alain Badiou, *Logics of Worlds (Being and Event II)*, trans. Alberto Toscano (London: Bloomsbury, 2009).

6. Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage Books, 1995).

a navigable foresight (*pronoia*) is driven, or actualized by hindsight (*metanoia*). *Metanoia* is the acquiring of an existential new light, of seeing the world in a different way; it is a lasting transformation of thought by way of a sense-event.⁷ When you have seen an artwork, read a passage of text, experienced an event from which you can never turn back, that is *metanoia* at work. It is a rupture in understanding of the semantic pillars bracing existent logic by way of knowledge or sense. The *metanoia* lacerates and opens us towards the periphery of certainty, the periphery of what is, ushering in an ethico-aesthetical orientation that forces *pronoia* into actuality; it inclines and prescribes the concrete navigation of an abstract machine. The bringing into existence of diagrammatic futurity is a labour of *philia*, an epidemic bond of abstract love intensifying the in-existent towards a ‘logical’ existence. It was proclaimed by Gigi Roggero, that to love the common is to hate its capture, and this is why such a labour of love must be abstract, for abstraction is the enunciation of detachment from the as-it-is condition, while affirming and bonding with the structural consequences of negation.



When we speak of a diagramme for the re-valuation of the value-form, we are not merely talking about tweaking economic models of production and distribution, more importantly we are speaking of a re-valuation of the life practices that subtend the logic of our existing world. No system of value production can be divorced from the life-world logical complex that supports its modes of operational legitimacy. This is why thinkers like Matteo Pasquinelli urge us towards an understanding of the common in all of its constitutive, life-world complexity comprised of energetic, biological, technological, linguistic, mythological strata, and, I would add, epistemic strata.⁸ Such a broadened image of a ‘stratified common’, steps beyond the

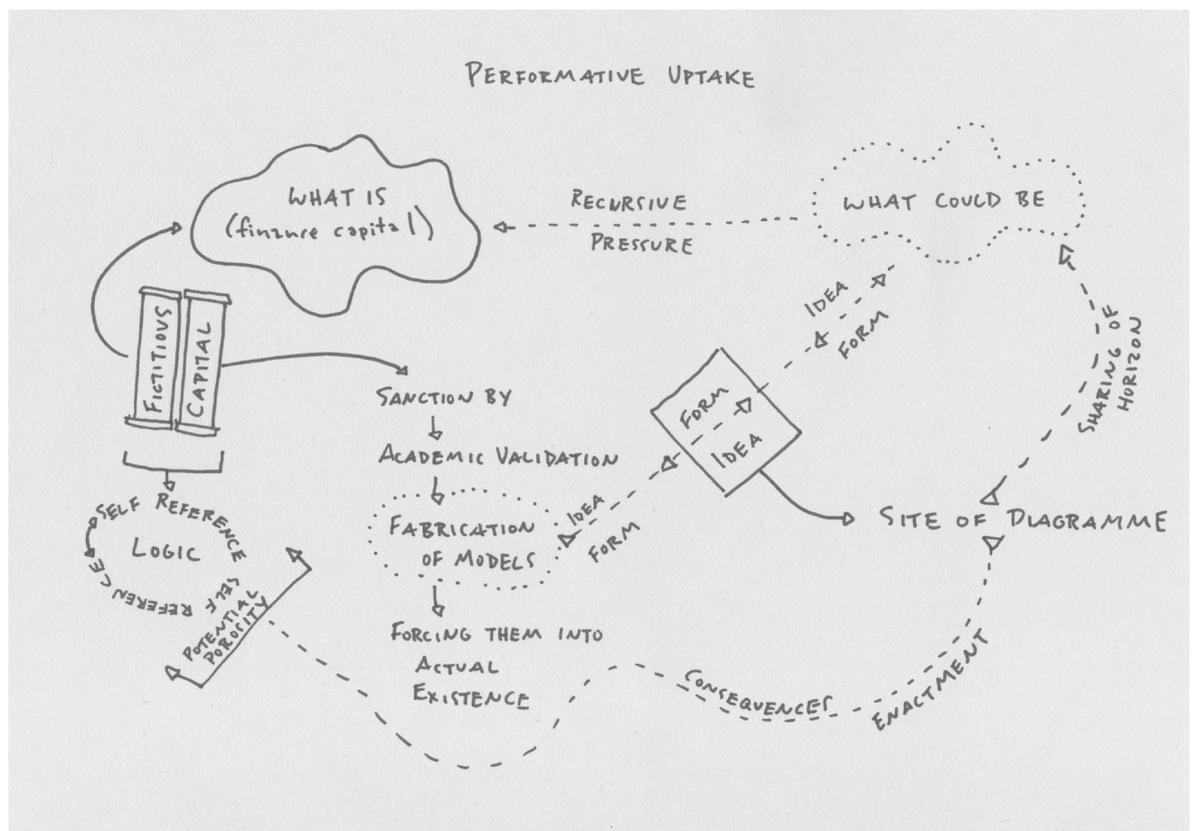
7. Armen Avanessian and Anke Hennig, *Introduction to Metanoia oder: Wie Lesen die Welt verändert* (Berlin: Merve Verlag, 2013).

8. Matteo Pasquinelli, *Animal Spirits: A Bestiary of the Commons*, (Rotterdam: Nai Publishers), 2006.

well-known illustrations of the common bound to a plane of immaterial production found in discourses surrounding digital production or the general intellect. Although having produced incredibly provocative social insights, the danger in binding the common absolutely to the sphere of immaterial production is that it disregards the organic Umwelt that affords our very existence, an Umwelt that does things whether we know it or not. Notions of material commons found in political economy, on the other hand, almost restrain the capacities of the human by putting all emphasis on ‘products’ that merely sustain our survival, falling into a trap of ‘existent’ finitude without radical reevaluation. Diagramming the common in this complex stratified sense, for a future beyond ‘mere survivability’, a future for more life and not mere life requires, and I agree with Pasquinelli here, a new topology to intersect, and evaluate these diverse strata.

III. Performative Uptake

Although conjuring up images of lines, graphs and mathematical explanations, the diagramme should not be conceived along a restrictive two-dimensional plane. The diagramme is above all a gesture of positing an inexistent horizon that can be manifest in myriad forms. Given the performative thrust of this gathering, it ought to be noted that the choreographic, is, historically, a type of writing of or for a collective body – literally the written or drawn notation of a movement in common. Not only *can* a diagramme be performed, just like it could be an architectural or a poetic proposition, the power of the diagramme only comes to actualization upon a performative uptake of its projected consequences.



With regard to a forging of the common in practice, some have suggested the sabotaging of chains of value-production, especially in the immaterial realm, while others have suggested strategies of retreat or hyper localisation. None of these options seem to move beyond a gesture of negation, which does little more than attracting a blip of attention or causing momentary dive in the stock exchange, leaving nothing to performatively incorporate into a longer-term functional structure. Diagramming the common, as I see it, would entail a constructive strategy that would seize upon the financial turn capital underwritten by powerful fictions. The successful uptake of the financialization project testifies to the potency of enacting a diagramme from which to take inspiration for our own ends where ideas and ideals launched in a mountain village in Switzerland and functionally modelled in Chicago have come to shape our everyday condition on a global scale. Since the first academic journal of finance economics emerged in 1974, the self-fulfilling prophecy of financial models, evidenced by Donald MacKenzie's analysis of the incorporation of the Black-Scholes-Merton model of efficient pricing upon the development (and 'legitimacy') of the Futures Market, points to the performative requirement underpinning the propagation of models buttressing 'fictitious capital'.⁹ Fictitious capital, like credit, shares and debt, are values that take on properties beyond what can be realized in the commodity form, creating a situation that has been described as entirely linguistic, that is, referring to nothing other than itself in a logic of recursivity. It is the sort of potential embodied in the interplay between models and recursivity that I suggest could orient a project of commoning and its attendant diagrammes for enactment. MacKenzie concludes his analysis with a rather surprising, open-ended question for a sociologist of finance, asking us: 'What sort of world do we want to see performed?' Since we are in the situation of a workshop experimenting with ideas, and attempting to find forms, it seems only fitting to end this talk in a similar fashion, with a degree of specificity: What sort of world *could be* constructed by performing a diagramme of the common?

9. Donald MacKenzie, *An Engine, Not A Camera: How Financial Models Shape Markets*, Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2008