

The London Consortium
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You Have a Future in Common Use

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Aiming to initiate interdisciplinary intellectual debate about paradoxes of contemporary culture, Static presents contributions from an international team of academics, artists and cultural practitioners.

The materials, assembled for each issue around a theme, include analytical essays and articles, interviews, art projects, photographic images, etc. Static will welcome feedback, argument and commentary from scholars, artists, and other readers, and will be regularly updated in order to communicate the most recent and relevant ideas and interpretations on the chosen topic.

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1 to promote ownership of the land

After 60 years of military control, Greenham Common was restored to a state of 'common land'. Common land is not public, nor does it, like most parks and open spaces in London, belong to the crown or aristocracy. Common land has a unique legal status in the UK based on the rights of use; it is the land that is 'in common'. King John established the rights of common in the early 13th Century. These gave the ownership of the land to the "Lord of the Manor", but ensured the legal rights of his subjects ("commoners") to graze their animals, collect firewood and gravel, and to use the plants for thatching or bedding for their animals.

In 1941 the land was requisitioned by the Air Ministry as a military base, and an airfield was built on it; Greenham was home first to British squadrons and then the American Air force. The common was briefly restored to the local community after the war, but in the 1950's the MOD extinguished commoners' rights and excluded people from a large part of the common. In 1981, the US Army infamously deployed nuclear missiles on the site, which sparked 10 years of anti-nuclear and peace demonstrations by various women's groups. The base was returned to the local authority (the new Lord of the Manor) in 1997, and work was begun to restore the common. In 2000 the common was formally re-opened to the public and is since managed for Wildlife by West Berkshire Council as a 'site of special scientific interest' (SSSI). In 2002 an Act of Parliament formally restored commoners' rights through the commoner's act and has safeguarded the common against any future development.

Support Structure questioned the relationship of the Common to the surrounding communities of Greenham, Newbury and Thatcham, and posted a series of Acts for Common Use, propositions for adjustments to the existing Commoners Act, to encourage rambling and thus a renewed ownership of the land. Promoting and developing a sense of ownership and belonging was recognized as crucial to the Common's restoration within people's lives, as well as or beyond its legal status and the weight of its history. It appeared that by the time the status of the Common was reinstated there were only 24 commoners left, i.e. 24 people living around the common who would be entitled to commoners rights. Support Structure, in dialogue with West Berkshire Council, proposed to support an auction of Commoners rights for Greenham and Crookham Common, in order to promote and expand ownership of this territory by the people who might actually use it within their everyday life.

2 to enjoy the restored right to roam

Planning and advertising language (reminiscent of military or governmental communication and propaganda especially since WWII) were used explicitly to promote public awareness and provoke a less passive use of the land. Resulting from a series of workshops and commissions for proposals, a new slogan for Greenham Common 'YOU HAVE A FUTURE IN COMMON USE' was placed on a large billboard erected on the face of the former base's control tower, one of the Common's only surviving reminders of its military past; the control tower, visible from afar and closed to the public, was thus rebranded as the heart of the Common and a new

destination for ramblers. Smaller notices announcing the proposed “Acts” were posted around the whole Greenham, Newbury and Thatcham area, acting as prompts for the new slogan and potential starting points for a myriads walks drawing lines between neighbouring communities through and towards the Common and its slogan.

Publicity is the state of being open to the knowledge of the public. Openness is therefore to be understood and experienced as a status, a legal and social one: the right to know. In the case of a potentially public space, to open is to offer the possibility of a direct experience, both literally through the opening of gates and their removal, and notionally so that access is a knowledge to be produced actively. The Common as a space of its users can therefore be integrated within a conversation amongst its neighbours, within all the different ways to walk to it, through it, around it.

Military land appears blank on ordinance survey maps, a white space of the unknown, erased for ‘security reasons’; this undescribed place – this being also a particular kind of inscription, that of an absence which emphasizes its very presence - is therefore other, a different territory in complete isolation from what can be read or understood, subject to the rights of some but not the public. Restoring the Common also means its reappearance within the Ordnance Survey and Rambler’s maps of the UK, and its being filled-in with the language used to describe land, paths and walkways, vegetation and use; its status shifting from undescribed to nondescript, as a seeking for a new found banality ‘in common’. Ranger Andy Phillips, who had been working on the Common for a number of years to restore its natural habitat, was commissioned to design icons describing the different types of land that inhabit it: cityland, containing dwellings or farms, commonland, heathland woodland and wetland. Those were used to draw the Common as it might appear on those maps, and place it back in its context both on the billboard and on the ‘Walk for Common Use’.

3

to roam as a social act

Roaming is aimless, it is travelling for the purpose of travelling, covering a territory as an end in itself and allowing the absence of a destination to open up possibilities for unexpected discovery; it is the activity of the rambler, who walks for pleasure. The term rambler is originally related to an urban context, and first appeared to describe a male individual wandering the streets of the city in the pursuit of pleasure (mostly of an illicit kind). Roaming is therefore to be understood in terms of both the flaneur’s observation of the city and the rambler’s pursuit of pleasure; the consumption of a landscape by physically consuming it, and the sense of ownership that ensues from such an activity. Walking becomes an active taking hold of, a claiming of ownership of a particular territory and history, a cumulative process drawn from the knowledge of a space and the personal dimensions it may contain; it allows the integration of a place within one’s mental maps of their environment as lived, as well as within a collective imaginary. To be able to walk one’s dog on the Common means placing it back into the banality of everyday life, beyond and above the weight of a particular political history towards a re-found state of publicity. A Common Use Walk, designed by Ranger Andy Phillips, was available for members of the public to try out on National Walking Day, 19th September.

4**to question the natural beauty of the land**

The Common was handed back to the council in 1997, and a long process of restoration of its 'natural habitat' ensued, which is still taking place today. This return involved the titanic task of removing traces of its military past, including what was once the longest runway in Europe, and therefore breaking and disposing of 1.25 million tonnes of concrete and asphalt, decontaminating the land and reinstating a vegetation in need of constant maintenance and upkeep. Some elements of this particular narrative remain as carefully chosen pieces, such as the nuclear silos area which will stay off-bounds and was sold to a private company, a concrete plane formerly used for training purposes, or the central cross of the runway. Other features can be recognized which speak of a previous history, like concrete posts showing some of the last physical traces of the women's peace camp. More subtly perhaps, signs appear which talk about erasure, and while the runway has disappeared, the particular way in which grassland is growing back on it means that one can just about guess its previous scale by the differing height and density of the vegetation, the lines of trees in the distance and of course the knowledge of its previous presence. Particular trees once grown here like ash, hazel and oak are in need of upkeep, which was at some point stopped, while other types of vegetation like heathland are more actively promoted, and of course grazing is also a specific kind of management of the land.

The landscape of Greenham Common is the reflection of a particular version of history, the official one, which is constantly in the making. The Common continues to be an active landscape, which creates, represses and promotes, through a relationship with the political at a micro and macro scale, demanding to be mediated and taken care of consciously. This landscape, any landscape, works not only as a reflection of power relations or a simple result of political processes, it also is an instrument or an agent of power by which or through which the political is implemented. Through this process, it also naturalizes a cultural and social process.

5**to interpret and develop the ecology**

Commonly, the interpretation of the Common deals with its recent history and the ecological qualities leading to its status as a SSSI, which include the heathland, and grassland rich in wildflowers and endangered plants and animals.

Ecology is the tractable set of relationships between human beings and their natural and social environments, and is a process by which identities are formed, and are in formation. Support Structure initiated an interpretation of the site by questioning its position within local human ecologies and its possibilities for future development. To approach these concerns a proposition for a new relationship between the common and the surrounding towns of Newbury and Thatcham were put forward in the form of a 'publicity campaign'.

What the publicity campaign promotes is a notion of agency on a micro and macro scale, one that opens the possibility for interpretation and support beyond the individual towards an engagement within the political

of a situation -how a site is run, managed, maintained, adjusted. Macro agency is the condition of a knowledge needing to be open and appropriated. This appropriation of micropolitics deals with the scale of individuals using a site, and expands its potential for a 'critical mass' of public use and opinion, reaffirming rights through a multiplicity of uses, and their simultaneous cohabitation. All the potential narratives of an inhabitation of place need to be articulated and visible through use in order to promote and provoke an experience of what it is or can be to be public, and private, or anything in between. The commoners act is a document that needs to change and adapt to a contemporary notion of what a legal right means or demands- grazing animals might seem irrelevant but this does not contradict the need for an evolution of the notions of publicness and use.

What does it mean to be together and how does that work as an emancipatory model of the Common, in common? The Common being the active public sphere that the surrounding communities have in common, commonality might be the site for a discourse on the public sphere to take place, of what it means to be together and how to keep this sphere open and in process, supporting above all a condition of change.