

MARY TREMONTE

Reconstructing the Commons

Against both state control and increasingly corporate, private ownership, 'the commons' opens a space for access and inclusion. It represents that which is not owned but made available for use by all, or at the least for use by those who have had a hand in its production and maintenance.



courtesy Mary Tremonte

Historically the commons has been considered in terms of space. It now addresses both material and immaterial dimensions, with the discussion ranging from common water, land and air, to the virtual commons of the internet.¹

The recent work of Toronto-based artist Mary Tremonte, who is a member of the politically-active printmaking collective *Justseeds*, calls for a reconstruction of the commons. Her participatory printmaking attempts to reclaim the public space that she so often works within. For a consideration of this work we must ask how we define a public and how this definition effects our conception of public space. Tremonte, informed by the writing of feminist activist and writer Silvia Federici, asks that we consider more deeply the significance of the feminist perspective on collective work. In doing so we expand our definition of the public while developing a more nuanced view of public space, one that might account for a more varied and diverse public. Any reconstruction of the commons must account for this diversity and be developed in relation to it.

This is demonstrated in a recent print (above) of Tremonte's that was exhibited at Civic Space for Windsor's 2013 MayWorks Festival. *For a Feminist Reconstruction of the Commons* depicts a quilt with the text of the title sewn into it. Hands are shown reaching in from the edge of the paper, continuing their work on the quilt. For this work Tremonte was inspired by quilting bees, where groups assemble to collaboratively stitch a quilt. She states that the quilting bee is emblematic of 'a space where women come together and work collectively, and where they build community through that collective work'.¹

Collective work, especially that which values the often overlooked domestic or reproductive labour that a quilting bee

represents, can contribute to this reconstruction of the commons by creating a shared space to meet the needs of everyday life. Though the location of this space may vary, depending on whether the quilting occurs in a community centre or in a member's living room, what is important is that the work is done communally.

The significance of the everyday should not be overlooked. Silvia Federici, whose writing Tremonte refers to as inspiration for this print, argues that in our current discussion of the commons we often under-value the importance of the reproduction of everyday life. This includes the domestic work, from cooking and cleaning to mending and home maintenance. Federici states that this work must be recomposed collectively, with tasks being shared, spaces opened and possessions circulated.² Although a community centre or housing cooperative is not in itself a commons, it certainly moves us in the right direction, and is one way that the feminist perspective can contribute to a reconstruction of the commons.

Another contribution of a feminist perspective, Federici argues, is a greater focus on collectivity where working together is necessary for any commons to exist. The many hands working on the quilt in Tremonte's print embody this collective work. In depicting hands alone she is interested in not only collectivity, but also a more inclusive pluralism, moving beyond the closed representation of single individuals in artworks, where gender and race are often clearly demarcated. By using only hands, which historically represent action and work, she leaves the figures open, while still depicting the collective nature of this work. While calling for a feminist reconstruction of the commons overtly in the text of the work, she is simultaneously demonstrating other, central issues in the realisation of the commons.

How do we move from representing the struggle to being present within it?



courtesy Mary Tremonte

Tremonte's interest in collective action extends beyond representation, as she values most those instances that combine exhibited print work with a place for participatory printing. While participating in the MayWorks Festival exhibition at the Civic Space, she ran a small mobile printing station in conjunction with the May Day parade, where individuals could silkscreen banners and posters alongside Tremonte. The silkscreens included slogans, developed in dialogue with Windsorites, such as *Solidarity Forever* and *Windsor is On Strike*. Participatory printing enacts what her own prints address, moving beyond representation toward a more direct presentation of these themes. Collective action and common efforts are no longer addressed on a rhetoric level, but become enacted through the participation of the public. Although we must acknowledge that the public is constituted and influenced by the related event – in this case May Day – the act of opening a print station in a public space certainly moves far beyond what is possible for many space-constrained print studios. By encouraging others to learn to print and by remaining mobile and engaged, she is developing a 'commoning' process with the potential to make an otherwise esoteric activity accessible and inclusive.

Inclusion is central to a reconstruction of the commons, and its relation to the public space that grounds it is crucial. Inclusion must consider the different groups and communities that constitute a public. Tremonte seeks to give visibility to groups that are often under-represented; the LGBTQ community, for instance, is addressed through her *Queer Scout Badges* and *Queering the Lodge* prints. When she prints *Solidarity is Forever* at a MayWorks Festival, she is employing not an empty catch phrase but a call for respect, inclusion and empowerment. Tremonte is not only working within

public space, but continually reclaiming the space for an expanded public that includes straight, gay, bisexual, transgendered and queer, with no one left behind. Although participatory printing might not achieve this reclamation on its own, it remains part of a larger project that seeks to break down barriers and actively engage others.

With the skills and knowledge shared through participatory printing, Tremonte demystifies processes of art production — silkscreen printing allows those without skills in drawing or painting to produce complex works of art with fairly accessible materials. Printing in public space allows others to engage with the process and, at times, even disrupt the lines between artist and viewer, performer and audience. Printing has the potential to empower a public, further activating the spaces they occupy through the many forms of expression and communication that art can take. Under-represented groups can achieve further visibility and reclaim public spaces that may have once been alien to them.

While this work must exist alongside other struggles and anti-privatisation campaigns for any true reconstruction of the commons to occur, it does serve to compliment and contribute to the broader movement. The road to any concrete commons is long and rocky, but it certainly can begin with the kind of inclusive, collective effort that is called for by Mary Tremonte.

¹ See Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri. *Commonwealth*. Cambridge: Belknap Press, 2011 for a significant discussion of this increased attention to the immaterial commons (or common, as they put it).

² Interview with Mary Tremonte, 2 August 2013

³ Silvia Federici. *Revolution at Point Zero: housework, reproduction and feminist struggle*. Oakland: PM Press, 2012