

NOTES ON THE UNCOMMONS

Author McKenzie Wark defines the “Uncommons” as an expansion of the meaning of “Commons”—a space for collective ownership and shared resources.¹ Wark argues that in the Uncommons, workers could get together not only to care for, create, and distribute shared goods and resources, but also to build a queer space and timeframe to challenge the dominant structures of capitalism, heteronormativity, and commodified cultural production. The Uncommons also accounts for what political philosopher Antonio Negri defined as “immaterial labour”: a self-organised labour producing social and common relations rather than the material commodities produced by capitalist labour. Thus, becoming uncommon subjects could be defined as a quest toward the reclamation and reconstitution of relationships and social structures by means of shared practices of care, resistance, and creativity.

In the Uncommons, we get to resignify ourselves. As philosopher Paul B. Preciado reminds us, the only way to step out of fascist, hegemonic systems of oppression is to flip the categories used to other us so that we can ultimately subvert or get rid of them.² In other words, by becoming uncommon we get to displace and give new meaning to notions that have gendered, pathologised, commodified, and racialised human and nonhuman bodies alike in order to extract economic value out of both waged and free labour. These notions have progressively widened the divide between classes and reinforcing binary epistemologies: left or right, hetero or queer, legal or illegal, white or otherwise, natural or unnatural. Becoming uncommon is to endeavour towards living better lives, which can only be fully realised when labour, understood as the subjugation of all life for the enrichment of an elitist few, is abolished.

Abolition as contemporary political theory emerged in the 1970s in the United States as a philosophical and activist movement

against the prison system. Prison abolitionism can be traced back from the mid-nineteenth century onwards, and the abolitionism movement is rooted in anti-slavery struggles across the world. However, in the last decades abolitionism has pluralised its demands beyond the abolition of the carceral system as a regime of punishment, free labour, and racism. Authors like Ruth Wilson Gilmore argue that abolition is not just a call to dismantle prisons: it is also an expansive framework for understanding and undoing the social, economic, and spatial relations that reproduce oppression among marginalised individuals and communities.³ It is within this framing that this exhibition explores the potential of abolition as a tool for the phaseout of systems of oppression. Calling for the abolition of labour is to open possibilities to reclaim and redefine work, moving from labour as a method of repression and exploitative extraction to the constitution of spaces of solidarity and collective action.

The Uncommons is a framework where freedom is exercised with others. It does not presume or produce a collective identity under the rubric of identity politics—a non-ecological means of political alliance-making based on exclusivity and essentialism that fails to furnish a broader conception of what it means to live together across difference, however difficult. Instead, the Uncommons enables dynamic relations of support, dispute, breakage, joy, and solidarity.⁴ Here, Judith Butler stresses that only as subjects—regardless of species—who recognise the conditions of ecological interdependency can any of us struggle for the realisation of any political goal during times in which the very social conditions of existence have come under economic and political assault.⁵

The Uncommons is a bodily demand for a more liveable set of lives. It is a demand that asks for a re-eroticisation of our bodies away from the commodifying gaze of Capitalism and unleashed from the biopolitical control of sexual reproduction as just a means to supply Capitalism with labour power. The

Uncommons beckons an eroticism best described by Audre Lorde: the erotic not only being a question of what we do with our bodies, but a question of how acutely and fully we can feel in the doing. Lorde states that “for once we begin to feel deeply all the aspects of our lives, we begin to demand from ourselves and from our life-pursuits that they feel in accordance with that joy we know ourselves to be capable of”.⁶ It is precisely this capability of joy that is so important to reclaim in the Uncommons, as “the sharing of joy, whether physical, emotional, psychic, or intellectual, forms a bridge between the sharers which can be the basis for understanding much of what is not shared between them, and lessens the threat of their difference.”⁷

Gradually we come to realise that the uncommon subject is unmistakably a queer subject. Not only in a literal sense, given that being uncommon is a trait made implicit to queer people, but also because it expresses the potentiality of bodies to remove themselves from the capitalist, patriarchal, and colonial genealogy of modernity by means of strategies of inadequacy, dissidence, and unidentification.⁸ Queerness, in its potential to reject identity as a condition for capital’s legibility, is able to upset power structures and reveal the intersectionality between struggles. To oppose Capitalism is to refuse to work under its subjugation. To oppose the construct of gender is to oppose class, as it influences and shapes gender roles and experiences based on factors like income, education, and occupation. To oppose class is to oppose labour, given that the economic value of work is based on the asymmetrical access to the means of production and information, which are captured by the richest at the expense of the poorest. And to oppose labour is to oppose ecological devastation, which is characteristic of a system that keeps demanding free work and resources from nonhuman animals and ecosystems.

The uncommon subject, thriving in dissidence, joyful in resistance, aware of ecological interdependency, pushes through

outmoded relations and forms of living. In this exhibition, we open a space and time where we can become uncommon by discussing processes of political agency; by carrying out supportive cultural production; by reflecting on how we consume and reproduce; by establishing interrelations out of distinctiveness; by finding more satisfying ways of self-representation; by exploring how we wish to desire and love. The task at hand is tremendous, but we are not starting from scratch. The Uncommons has been long rumbling in every queer, trans-feminist, antiracist, union, crip, and ecological movement. Across differences, we fight for uncommon paradigms to replace the “normal” principles of Capitalism. In our banners we paraphrase McKenzie Wark’s call: “Workings of the world untie! You have a win to world!”⁹

1 McKenzie Wark has been theorising on the commons for over two decades of writing, activism, and research. The concept of “Uncommons” has been underlying in her work, and she recently gave a lecture about it at Kanal-Centre Pompidou, in Brussels: <https://worldhistoriesofthecommons.brussels/en/programs/mckenzie-wark-the-uncommons>

2 Paul B. Preciado, *Dysphoria Mundi* (Anagrama, 2022), 21.

3 Ruth Wilson Gilmore, *Abolition Geography: Essays Towards Liberation* (Verso, 2023).

4 Ibidem, 27.

5 Ibidem, 45.

6 Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider* (Crossing Press, 2007), 57.

7 Ibidem, 56.

8 Preciado, 27.

9 These exclamations are quoted from an interview to McKenzie Wark by Tuğçe Yilmaz on bianet.org: <https://bianet.org/yazi/mckenzie-wark-we-need-to-build-a-new-world-in-the-ruins-225920>. It echoes her theoretical work on “the hacker class”, which she extensively wrote about in *A Hacker Manifesto* (Harvard University Press, 2004) and *Capital is dead: is this something worse?* (Verso, 2019)

10 For a comprehensive theory of queer time, we recommend Time Binds. *Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories*, by Elizabeth Freeman (Duke University Press, 2010).





Sto dney do prikaza. Hussein Erkenov, 1990.
Still from *A Moving History of the Young Worker*, 2025.

WORKS IN THE EXHIBITION



Textiles of Resistance, Installation view at Sonsbeek 20–24: Force, Times, Distance. On Labour and its Sonic Ecologies. Arnhem, 2021.

Textiles of Resistance questions the material basis of the archive: paper, a substance that must be isolated to be preserved, and which is emblematic of the nature/culture divide. In translating their archive of social movements onto fabric and displaying the printed textiles in open air and in exhibition spaces, Werker Collective seeks to ecologically embed their work in a physical way. Werker works with natural dyes and fabrics to screen print imagery and text from their archive. The labour of printing is done collectively, which allows for a social, political, symbolic, and ecological means of working, as well as it opens up a time and space where knowledge and experience are shared among workers.

The set of textiles on display present a selection of content from Werker's archive that reflect on different kinds of interactions between human bodies and ecosystems under the western ideological and material divide between nature and culture. The featured documents were selected collectively between Werker

and their collaborators. This participatory means of working with source materials for designing textiles seeks to physically manifest the archive and address the project's core question: How can Werker Collective's design and artistic practice be rearticulated to enable and support an ecosystem of care in balance with nature and non-human forms of life? Furthermore, a more somatic knowledge of the archive is possible in its textile activation and manifestation, as patterns of reading, touching, and moving coalesce once the textiles are hung together. The project follows the economic model of the art cooperative, to help sustain the collectives involved in the production of the textiles.

A new series of textiles will be produced during the exhibition on the topic of Abolition.

Project in collaboration with: Hannah Dawn Henderson, Pierre Gramond-Dodet, Gleb Maiboroda, studio bonbon, Christine van der Heide, Teuntje Kranenburg, Razia Barsatie, Nell Schwann, Hyeonju Lee, Tomris Türker, and We Sell Reality.

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The film installation *A Moving History of the Young Worker* examines the history of the international labour movement from a queer perspective. The work is composed of fragments from various source materials: feature films, documentaries, amateur films, TV broadcasts, educational films, commercials, etc. It pays special attention to the ways in which the body of the worker has been depicted in different geographical and political circumstances, critically inquiring into the cognitive infrastructures, representation regimes, and visual narratives of the worker's body as a semiotic vessel of Capitalism and under commodified expressions of desire.

The fragments are edited using the technique of montage: introduced in 1925 by the queer Soviet filmmaker Sergei Eisenstein, montage pieces together a film by interjecting scenes and shots in nonlinear ways to convey meaning and emotion and ignite a revolutionary spirit in the audience. By using montage and thoughtfully selecting the excerpts that conform the piece, Werker examines a history of the young worker through queer time. Traditional time often revolves around reproduction, both biologically and culturally. Queer time resists this, offering space for different kinds of relationships, desires, and life choices that are not necessarily centred on

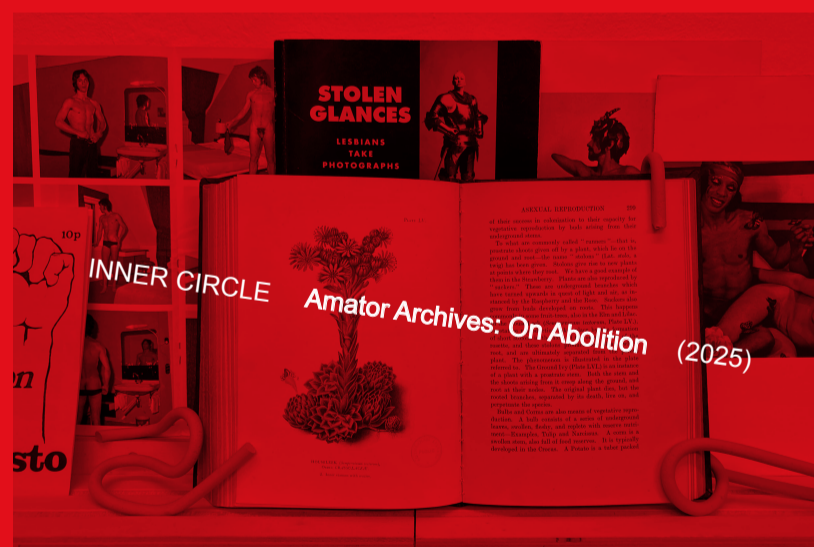
reproduction or conventional family structures. It is a time that is open to new ways of living, relating, and being in the world unbound to heteronormative clockwork, and a time that embraces rest, idleness, and unproductivity.¹⁰

Werker started their research for *A Moving History of the Young Worker* in 2018, when they organised a queer cine-club at U-Jaszdowsky CCA in Warsaw. Werker was inspired by the worker cine-club culture that emerged in Poland during the Soviet era, when workers produced their own amateur films with film equipment that was made accessible to them at the factories. Polish worker cine-clubs managed to circumvent the official narratives that were prevalent in the dominant media at the time and addressed questions around gender, desire, consumerism, mass-media, sexuality, work, family, housing, leisure, and so on.

A Moving History of the Young Worker was further developed this year in relation to Werker's research on Ferdinand Domela Nieuwenhuis (1846–1919). Nieuwenhuis is considered the godfather of anarchism in the Netherlands, and had strong roots in Friesland, where both emancipatory politics and the international labour movement have a long history. The structure of the work is determined by 'the five K's' that, according to Nieuwenhuis, oppressed the worker: Kerk (church), Koning (king), Kapitaal (capital), Kazerne (army) and Kroeg (pub).

All speech in the film extracts has been removed and transcribed into an appendix that can be found and read in the exhibition. By doing this, Werker opens a space of analysis, reflection, and reading that differs from the traditional cinema experience: that of a cine-club, where its participants become discursively involved in the discussion and interpretation of film.

Project in collaboration with: Beeld & Geluid, Enthusiast Archive, Fries Film & Audio Archief, Internationaal Instituut voor Sociale Geschiedenis, London Community Video Archive, and Vrij Archief Nieuwmarkt.



Amator Archives: On Queer Reproduction at Rijks OPEN 2022, Installation detail.

Archiving and counter-archiving are central to the practice of Werker Collective. Comprising several thousand documents, the archive is continuously activated by people working in different constellations to collectively explore marginalised histories and to generate new political imaginaries. These explorations take the form of workshops and publications, performances and installations. In the context of the exhibition *BECOMING UNCOMMON SUBJECTS*, a selection of materials from the archive on the topic of abolition is on display together with

two readers convened under the same topic. The reading material has been selected from existing archival material and reinforced with suggestions by collaborators and the team of RADIUS. These documents will be activated through a reading rehearsal during the course of the exhibition and will be open to public participation.

Project in collaboration with: Ester Venema, Emma-Lee Amponsah, Müge Yilmaz, Ines Cox, Wouter Stroet, Vincent Becher, Hana Kiani, Albert Roig Juan, and Parsa Adibi.

COLOPHON

WERKER COLLECTIVE
BECOMING UNCOMMON SUBJECTS
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