

# 5

## BEING-IN- RELATION AND REINVENTING THE COMMONS<sup>1</sup>

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This chapter explores how the ‘commons’ is a political project that is central to feminist strategies for reconstructing our social, political, affective and cognitive agency in contemporary society. The paper draws on a number of projects developed by *atelier d’architecture autogérée*, with residents in Paris and its suburbs, to demonstrate how these processes of sexed, spatial and ecological reinvention – whose ‘agents’ are mostly women – produce new social relations of and for the commons.

### *for the most part, women*

I have written about our practice on a number of occasions (Petcou and Petrescu 2005, 2007, 2010, 2013), and I will mention it again to speak about its contribution to the reinvention of the commons. I will introduce in this context the work of certain participants (for the most part, women) in our projects – work I would not identify immediately as ‘feminist’. I would rather say that the reinvention of the commons is a work of the ‘relational’ and the ‘differential’ in which feminine subjectivity has an active role to play.

The agents of this reinvention of the commons, who in our projects are *for the most part women*, form a collective subject that remains indeterminate and unstable and does not belong to a single gender, but is nevertheless defined by sexual difference as long as it is constructed by reference to ‘women’. To be considered, this subject needs a sort of ‘realist essentialism’ (Stone 2006), an essentialism whose statements are based on unmediated experience and long-term observation. *For the most part, women*: a provisional, partial collective subject, not quite homogenous not quite heterogeneous; ‘feminine’, and possibly ‘feminist’ but without guarantee, evolving and changing continually.

As such, the imagining of a collective subjectivity that reinvents the commons requires the mobilization of feminist knowledge, such as Luce Irigaray’s work on *l’être-en-relation* (of women) and on sexual difference as a fundamental articulation of our relation with nature and culture (Irigaray 2004).<sup>2</sup>

The question of the *commons* is also at the heart of current discussions on democracy. According to Marxist philosopher Antonio Negri, the contem-

porary revolutionary project is concerned with capturing, diverting, appropriating and reclaiming these commons as a key constituent process.<sup>3</sup> It is a re-appropriation and at the same time a reinvention. This undertaking needs new categories and new institutions, new forms of management and governance, and new spaces and actors – an entire infrastructure that is both material and virtual. Setting up this infrastructure is a relational process: it is the creation of connections and links, a networking of ideas, tools and subjectivities. This networking should be itself a form of ‘commons’: accessible, fair, sustainable, and so on. The reinvention of the commons needs space and time for sharing, it needs continual and sustained ‘commoning’ – social processes to maintain and reproduce the commons.<sup>4</sup> It needs specific agencies based on a different way of meeting needs and provision through cooperation and shared values, as well as ‘agents’, who are active individuals with their subjectivity and their way of engaging with each other.

I’ll take as example a few instances from my experience with *atelier d’architecture autogérée* (aaa),<sup>5</sup> a collective platform founded in 2001 in Paris by Constantin Petcou and myself, to conduct explorations, actions and research that encourage local residents to participate in the reappropriation and self-managed use of space in the city. For us as architects, the revival of the commons involves a tactical reappropriation and a collective investment of immediately accessible spaces in order to invent new forms of property and shared living that are more ethical and more ecological. We have identified a particular type of space – urban interstices, leftovers and wastelands – as a possible territory to be collectively reappropriated as a specific form of urban commons in the contemporary city.<sup>6</sup> These are commons that are reclaimed and reinvented in fragments, through small abandoned or unused spaces which by their temporary and uncertain nature have, until now, resisted land speculation. These forms of spatial commons contribute to the reinvention of other social, cultural and environmental commons.

aaa’s practice started in 2001 with the realization of a temporary garden made out of reclaimed materials on a derelict site in La Chapelle in the

north of Paris. This garden, called *ECObox*, has been supplemented with other mobile facilities (kitchen, library, media lab, DIY workshop) and has progressively extended into a platform for urban creativity that has catalysed activities in the whole neighbourhood. The platform has since moved several times within the area, using the same principles,<sup>7</sup> but taking different forms in different locations and involving new users. This approach was continued in the *Passage 56* project, which started in 2006 on a 200-square-metre empty plot located on rue Saint Blaise, in a high-density residential area in the 20th arrondissement in Paris. The plot, which was formerly a passageway, was considered non-constructible and therefore abandoned for many years. aaa designed and initiated various uses (such as gardening, compost making, repairing, skill exchange, organic vegetable distribution in the neighbourhood) for the space, and developed ecological practices with the participation of residents. *Passage 56* is a prototype of ‘open source’ architecture that experiments with forms of collectively produced space and pioneers unusual partnerships between institutions, professionals, local organizations and residents that challenge the current stereotypical models of urban management. The project is socially and ecologically sustainable, currently being self-managed by residents of the area. Since 2011, we have developed *R-Urban*, a participative strategy of resilience based on a network of civic hubs which support citizen resilient practices and connect them through locally closed ecological loops. *R-Urban*’s first two hubs – *Agrocité* and *Recyclab* – are collectively run, and catalyse existing activities with the aim of introducing and propagating resilient routines and lifestyles which residents can adopt and practice on individual and domestic levels, such as retrofitting properties to accommodate food cultivation, waste recycling and energy generation.

Our projects propose a wider understanding of architecture above and beyond buildings and physical space, affirming its multiple forms based on social relationships and new forms of collaboration that develop the active participation of users and conduct to their gradual transformation into stakeholders.

We have initiated as such a series of self-man-

aged spaces such as gardens, mobile facilities or collective hubs of resilient practices, where those who take part can use rather than possess, explore ways of sharing, and take responsibility towards what is shared. They are, as Félix Guattari puts it, “local hotbeds of collective subjecting” (Guattari 1980: 56). The collective subjecting is in fact the process of becoming subject of a collective of separate individuals that meet around a shared project.

We have initiated such processes, that took spatial, social or cultural forms, and lead to other processes – political or emotional – generated this time by the collectives that form around these spaces. These processes produce a new collective subjectivity that is local, relational and differential, and at the same time sharing a common spatial infrastructure: they produce a community and at the same time the space for it.<sup>8</sup>

We qualify our projects as ‘relational’ because they create connectivity: they stimulate desire and pleasure but also prompt political and civic responsibility on the local level, giving collectives of local residents the possibility of appropriating space in the city through daily activities (say, gardening, cooking, games or DIY). Rather than objects, we design *agencies*.

### **The activities of the commoning agency**

Architecture is for us an agency shared with the users of our projects. We shared the knowledge necessary for the appropriation of space, the conception and management of architecture, a principle which conducts to what we call ‘architecture autogérée’ (self-managed architecture).<sup>9</sup> Instigating commoning activities (gardening, cooking, repairing, recycling), we consequently challenged the users of our projects to take active positions. The spatial transformation somehow generated transformations within the users themselves and changed their motivations and their engagement. We noticed that not all users were involved in the same way in the spatial transformation; nor did they resubject themselves in the same way. Some began as gardeners, and little by little have started to take on other roles and involve themselves in the self-management of the space, eventually becoming political

subjects, aware of the political implications of such reclaiming and reconstruction of urban commons.

See Diagram 5.1 on page xx.

Diagramme 1 shows how individuals have been involved in time in different commoning activities, resubjecting themselves from gardeners to cultural workers, managers and civic activists, fighting politically for reclaiming new spaces for the continuation of the project when the project was threatened with eviction in 2005. Diagramme 2 (in which gender is represented through colour convention: green for male, purple for female) shows how those who have resubjected themselves politically were for the most part women.

One of the most important commoning activities that tactically drove this process of resubjecting was ‘gardening’, which started as a simple leisure activity but later developed into a complex agency involving other activities and networks: a ‘gardening agency’. The gardening agency involves large-scale environmental processes while also being adapted to small-scale, quotidian uses and practices. Over time, this way of acting can produce a constituent space for collective modes of functioning that generates commoning practices.

After a while, we came to the realisation that the most active ‘gardening’ agents in our projects were, as mentioned, *for the most part, women*.

This is not because they have more time than others – that is, time for unpaid minor volunteer activities – but primarily because they see an importance in these activities, and understand their political, ethical and environmental impact. We have realised that with this kind of project, we succeed in opening up a space in which a particular type of feminine subjectivity finds an area of creativity and innovation: projects that are cared for, engaged in and in which you see the results of your engagements with others; projects that teach the patience and attention of the reproductive work.

Political philosopher Sylvia Federici has remarked that across the globe, much of the work of reproduction is done by women, for the most part: not only at home, but at the community level, in hospitals, schools, neighbourhoods, villages and cities, in both the Northern and

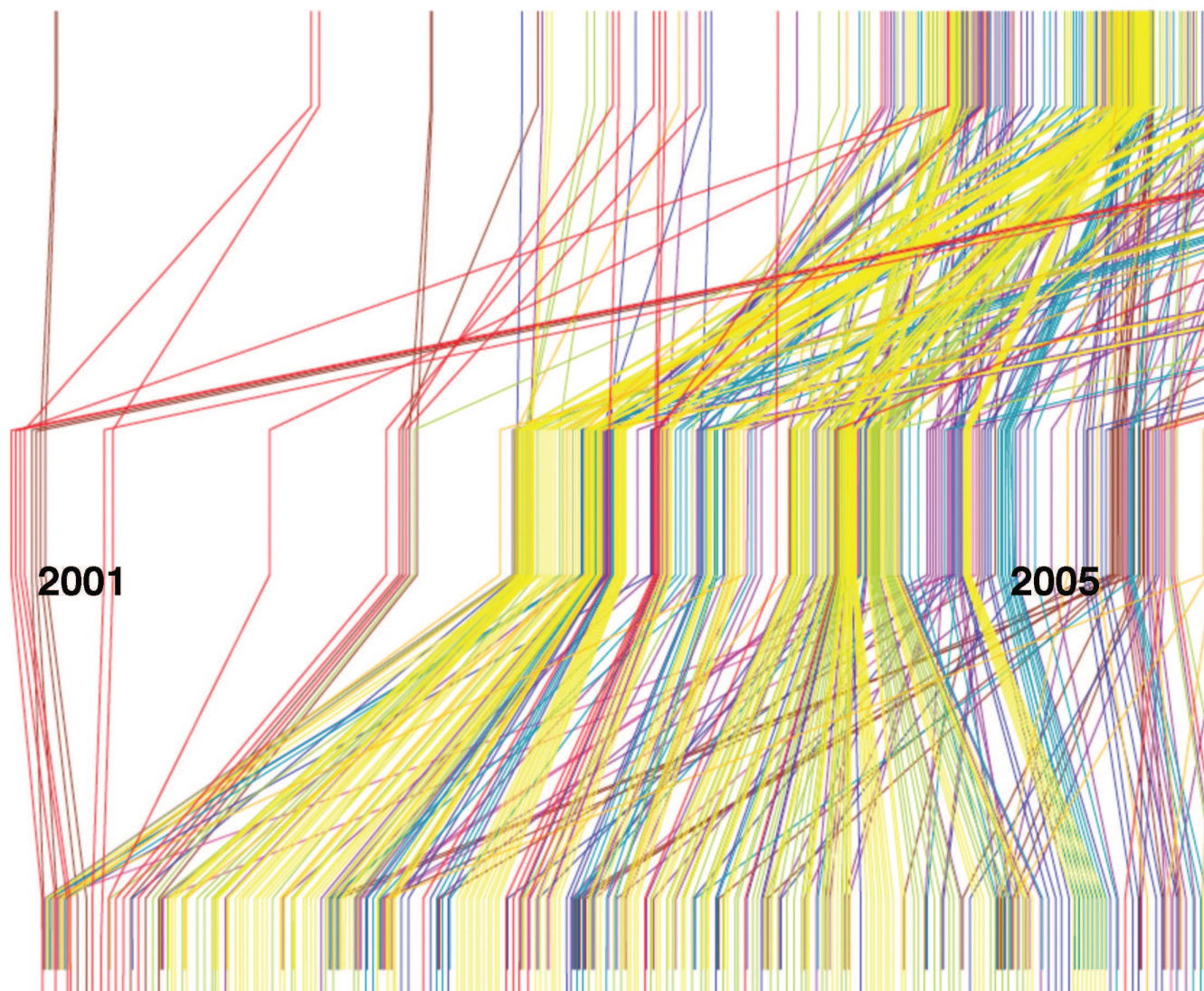


Diagram 5.1: Users' subjectivation through participation in the Ecobox project activities, diagram by aaa



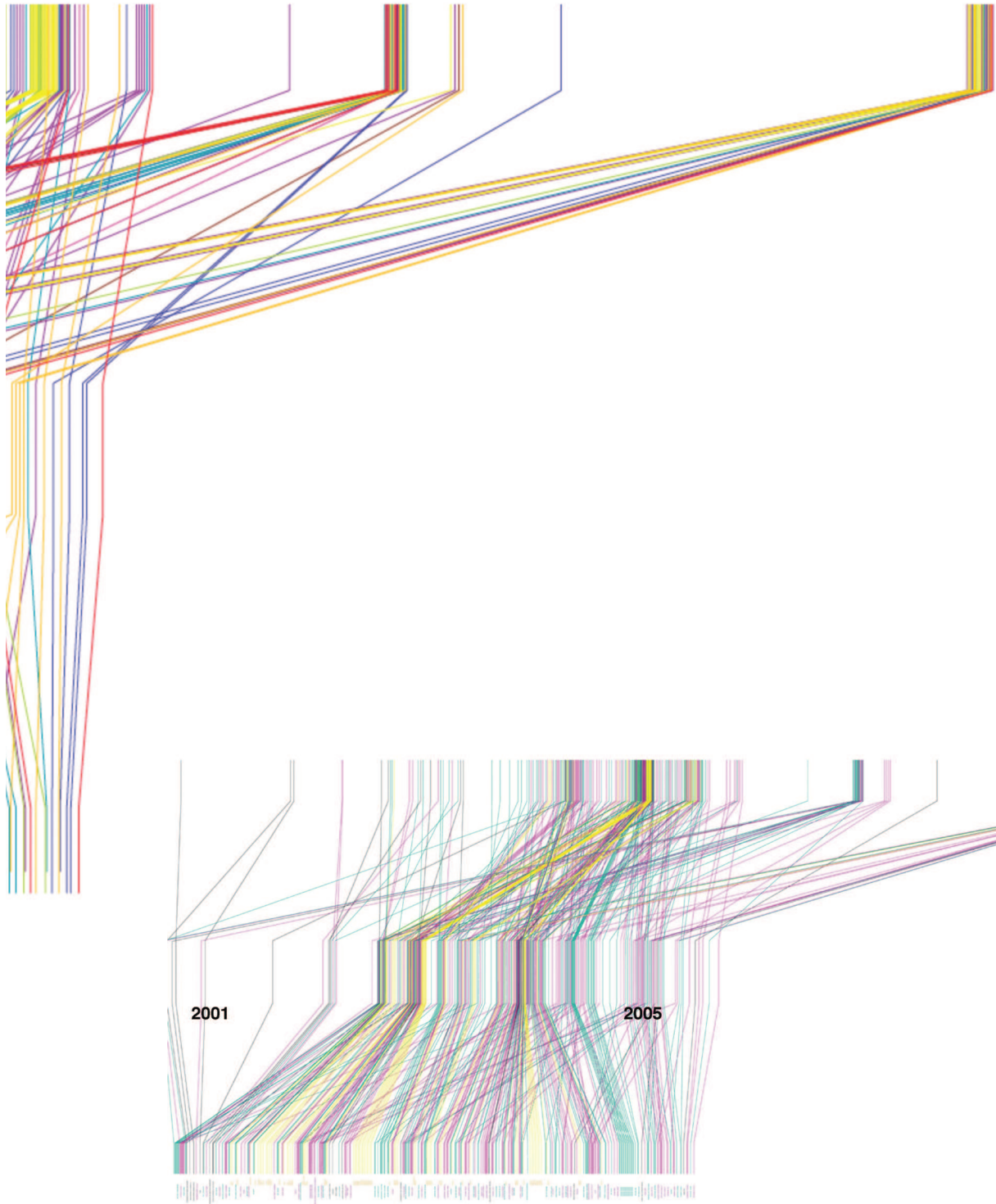


Diagram 5.2: Gender based subjectivation through participation in the Ecobox project activities, diagram by aaa



Fig 5.1: Passage 56, collectively managed cultural and ecological space, Paris20e, 2006, photo credit: aaa

Southern hemispheres.<sup>10</sup> This work of reproduction is a particular way for women to construct their own subjectivity, as subjects connecting to other subjects.

### Being-in-relation

Irigaray began talking about feminine subjectivity and its *être-en-relation* – its capacity to be-in-relation – in the 1970s. In the 1990s, this idea of feminine subjectivity took a new twist with Rosi Braidotti's work on 'nomadic' subjectivity (Braidotti 1994) and Judith Butler's on 'performative' subjectivity (Butler 1990). Despite the large differences in position, all three have understood a particular capacity of the female subject to make herself 'available': to devote herself to and allow herself to be affected by different agencies at once (say, social, cultural, political, sexual and emotional), and to create relations and be transformed by relations.

In our projects, most of the women came first to garden and after a number of years of activity began

to take on responsibilities in the group, sometimes becoming engaged citizens and arriving on the 'edges of the political', to borrow Jacques Rancière's concept (Rancière 1988). Their personal transformation and subjectivity re-construction was part of both the construction of the group as well as the processes that made up the project. In Diagramme 2, we see clearly how the critical mass of women involved in fighting for reclaiming new spaces for the continuation of the project when the project was threatened with eviction created a 'line of flight' towards a collective political moment within the project.

Most of the women in the group have taken part in the invention of new activities and processes in our projects, spaces and active processes, and new objects of the commons – all with a strong reproductive dimension. These included, in the case of *ECObot*, mobile facilities, such as a library, kitchen or a participatory urban laboratory, flea markets and other forms of alternative economy or, in the case of *Passage 56* and *R-Urban*, ecological processes, such

as urban food production, dry toilets, water collectors, compost making, chicken and bee keeping, local energy production and green roofing. The work of reproduction induced by our projects has strong ecological dimensions, as reflected in their main activities: reparation, recycling, reuse, resilience.

Our role as architects has been to develop, sometimes initiate, and then support and prop up the networks that emerge around these different activities, spatial systems, processes and effects that allow both personal futures and collective futures.

A relational and co-operative practice, like the one we have developed, has a different temporality and a different aim than those of a neo-liberal practice: rather than looking for a material value of profit, it creates the conditions for a liberating experience that changes both the space and the subjects.

Just like the ‘gardeners’, our socio-spatial and ecological devices have played the role of ‘mediators’<sup>11</sup> in the networks’ development within the project. For example, in the *ECObot* project, a mobile device for an urban kitchen was used very successfully by African women who were living in the area of La Chapelle.<sup>12</sup> Most of them were not working outside the home, and some did not even speak French, but they came with their kids and realised they could use their skills and be part of the project by setting up a small informal business, which allowed them to have a social role in the neighbourhood. The mobile kitchen moved across chosen locations and attracted the most diverse cross-section of users to the project, with their individual knowledge and motivations; it also connected the garden with other spaces in the neighbourhood, and imagined spaces suggested by the recipes and ingredients that were used. Certain users, *for the most part, women*, also invented other ‘mediators’: a shared library, flea markets, artisan markets, and so on. These mediators influenced and differentiated the nature of the project. We thus moved from gardening-dominant activities and the free-use of time towards cultural, political and poetic production and distribution. These agent-users suggested new economic forms, which stressed personal exchange, reciprocity and giving (for example, ‘honesty stalls’, flea markets

and ‘feminine’ knowledge exchanges at *ECObot* and communal picnics, teas and film projections at *Passage 56*).

Similar economic forms emerged in one of the *R-Urban* hubs, *Agrocité*, which is an agricultural hub comprising commons including an experimental micro-farm, community gardens, educational and cultural spaces. Vegetable and animal products (eggs, honey, worm compost) are distributed locally through the minimarket, the canteen and the shop. Among the many groups using the infrastructure of *Agrocité* economically and ecologically, the canteen group provided a hybrid economic model, where a group of unemployed inhabitants from the area (mostly women) took turns to prepare meals once a week, cooking dishes with vegetables from the garden and donating 20% of the profit to cover part of *Agrocité*’s expenses. The canteen supported other initiatives within *R-Urban*, such as *Ecole du Compost* [School of compost], whose trainees ate their lunch at *Agrocité*, or the elderly group, who received a cooked meal once a week. This approach aimed for a local economy that mixed reciprocal exchange (hardware and know-how), contribution to the commons and also provided personal benefits.

Feminist economists Katherine Gibson and Julie Graham referred to ‘community economies’ which are the invisible, often informal underground parts of the economic iceberg, of which only the market economy is visually displayed.<sup>13</sup> These ‘community economies’ create “ethical and political space of decision in which interdependence is constructed as people transform their livelihoods and lives”.<sup>14</sup> Initiatives such the canteen constructed interdependence within the commons of *Agrocité*, along with the evolution of the project.

These interdependences are also forms of resilience within the project. In this context, resilience is understood not only as adaption and thriving in changing circumstances, but as the opportunity for transformation and reinvention through reproductive work, knowing that this process has to take place on the micro-scale, with each individual and each subjectivity, in order to have effects on larger scales. Resilience takes a political dimension in our projects because it relates explicitly to practices of commoning. However, this communing, which





Fig 5.2: Agrocite /R-Urban – Urban Agriculture Civic Hub, Colombes92, 2013 photo credit: Andreas Lang

Fig 5.4: #saveRURBAN protest at Agrocite – 16 february 2016, photo credit: Analia Cild

Fig 5.3: Agrocite – R-Urban Day event, 2015, photo credit: aaa



conducts to new forms of social and ecological self-governance, can be interpreted as a threat by mainstream politicians. This was the case with *R-Urban* in Colombes, where – despite the social and ecological benefits of the project – the right-wing government decided to evict *Agrocité* in order to build a temporary car park. Here, once again, women for the most part were the agents of the process of resistance, organizing protest campaigns, collecting funds, and mobilising support. When governments cease to represent the interest of their populations, alternative forms of politics are needed, in which women have a role to play.

These agents are carriers of a kind of resilient revolution: a struggle to (re)conquer the city's overlooked territories by alliances and not by war; to transform them into new forms of commons, into shared spaces and temporalities. It is these agents who initiate and maintain the ecological work of the commons. They are the humble gardeners of a rhizomatic reproduction and reinvention of democracy in times of change.

1  
This chapter is a revised and extended version of an article originally published in French in the 'majeure' of the journal *Multitudes*, Issue 42, 2010. The English translation of the article by Tom Ridgway had been amended and completed by the author, and was first published as 'Gardeners of the Commons' in Petrescu, D., Petcou, C. and Awan, N. (eds.) (2011) *Trans-Local -Act*, London: aaa peprav. A revised version of that text, 'Gardeners of Commons, for the most part, women' became a chapter in Rawes, P. (2013), *Relational Architectural Ecologies*, Abingdon: Routledge, pp. 261–274.

2  
The relationship between sex, nature and culture is one of ontological significance in Irigaray's work. "Without working through this relation from the very beginning", Irigaray argues, "we cannot succeed in entering into relation with all kinds of other, not even with the same as ourselves" (Irigaray, L. (2004), *Key Writings*, New York: Continuum, quoted in Raws, P. (2009), 'Building Sexuate Architectures of Sustainability', paper at the Luce Irigaray Circle Conference, Hofstra NY, p. 9). Peg Rawes notes that for Irigaray, it is through sexuate difference that "real sexed and ethical relations (i.e. relationships as 'ecologies') can be actualized in cultural and natural environments" (ibid.).

3  
Ravel, J. and A. Negri (2008), *Inventer le commun des hommes* (Inventing the common), *Multitudes* No. 31. Paris: Éditions Amsterdam.

4  
In his definition of the commons, Massimo de Angelis underlines the importance of three elements: a non-commodified common pool of resources; a community to sustain and create commons; and the process of 'commoning' that binds the community and the resources together. This third element is arguably the most important for understanding the commons, in Massimo's opinion (de Angelis, M. and Stavrides, S. (2010). "Beyond Markets or States: Commoning as Collective Practice", *An Arkitektur*).

5  
See also: [www.urbantactics.org](http://www.urbantactics.org)

6  
The 'commons' traditionally referred to common pool resources – usually, forests, atmosphere, rivers or pastures – of which the management and use was shared by the members of a community. They were spaces that no one could own but everyone could use. The term has now been enlarged to include all resources (whether material or virtual) that are collectively shared by a population.

7  
ECObbox, for example, has been moved and reinstalled several times by users, and the organisational and occupational systems have been reproduced in other independent initiatives (whether citizen-based or professional) in the neighbourhood and elsewhere. We call this a rhizomatic transmission – in which the prototype has the capacity to transmit all the information necessary for its reproduction, and where the product of this transmission – the reproduction of the prototype – becomes itself a new transmission source of the information, whether independently or in a chosen relation to the original prototype. These projects' existence at different sites may only be temporary, but the accumulation of knowledge through experience is nevertheless passed on and reproduced in new projects which, though new and original, carry the torch and serve as the continuation of the same model, a similar protocol and process.

8  
For more on this subject, see my text 'How to make a community as well as the space for it' (Petrescu, D. (2009), 'How to make a community as well as the space for it' in *The Rururban Plot*, Galicia: CGAC (Spanish / English) 2009, pp. 107–112.

9  
*Autogestión* is a word that has a particular significance in French political history, referring directly to the ideological struggles and anti-statist social movements of the nineteenth century, and to the idea of 'workers' control'. Following other thinkers like Lefebvre, Castoriadis, Guillemy, we were fully aware of this meaning, but in our case, the figure of the 'worker' is replaced by that of 'inhabitant' or 'user'.

10  
Frederici S. (2012), *Revolution at Point Zero: Housework, Reproduction, and Feminist Struggle*, Oakland: PM Press.

11  
Bruno Latour's analysis of the 'social' in his Actor Network Theory (ANT) mentions the active elements that human and non-human actors share and that take on the role of 'mediators': they transport, translate and transform the content and the nature of the network's links. Latour, B. (2005) *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor Network Theory*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

12  
La Chapelle is a neighbourhood in North of Paris in which the percentage of residents with immigrant backgrounds was amongst the highest in Paris (30%). The area has a strong African presence, having been known in the 1990s for the high numbers of immigrant squats, and more recently being one of the privileged locations of refugee informal camps.

13  
Gibson-Graham, J.K. (2006), *A Postcapitalist Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press).

14  
Gibson-Graham, J.K. and Roelvink, G. (2009), Social Innovation for Community Economies, in MacCallum, D., Moolaert, F., Hillier, J. and Haddock, S. (eds.). 2009. *Social Innovation and Territorial Development*; London: Ashgate Publishing, pp. 25–38.