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Raviola, Elena; Gasparin, Marta; Hansson, Helena

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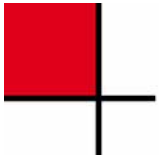
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Commoning through institutional aesthetics: Crafting frames, boundaries and reflections in practice*

Elena Raviola, Marta Gasparin and Helena Hansson

abstract

In this essay, we explore Cooper's theorizing of institutional aesthetics and technology to analyse a field study of a commoning process at a recreational area at Linnarhult near Gothenburg, Sweden. The paper focuses on a series of craft interventions that used the willow plant to make the area a common space. Using Cooper's theories, we analyse the community craft activities conducted at Linnarhult as an aesthetic process of making a common space by crafting frames, boundaries and reflections on site. We thus conclude by highlighting the process of commoning through institutional aesthetics, and we reflect on our attempt to use Cooper's theoretical ideas in analysing a concrete case. His emphasis and exemplary writing on the aesthetics of institutions has inspired us greatly, but our exploration has come with challenges and probably a deal of betrayal.

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Introduction

In this essay, we reflect on making a common space using Robert Cooper's (1991/2023) notion of institutional aesthetics and experiment with his theoretical ideas in order to research and analyse, and finally complete a field study. We thus dwell on and intersect with his understanding of the notions of institutions, aesthetics, and technology to frame how a recreational green area in the peri-urbanity of Gothenburg in Sweden was shaped into a common space through willow crafting activities. Our field research and practices are situated in the debate concerning the shrinking of public space in liberal democracies that leads to the emergence of new practices of 'commoning' (Ostrom, 1990; Hess, 2008). This refers to the mobilizing of common resources, which are cared for and used by a given community. 'Commons' are generally indexed as spaces, for example streets, squares, roads we pass through every day, places where children play, where there are benches to sit on to drink a cup of tea or for chatting with a friend, but they might also be immaterial, such as intellectual property rights, indigenous culture and other cultural and knowledge commons (Hess, 2008).

Cooperating with the local civic organization Eco-Agroforestry Centre (EAC), our research focuses on a series of design and craft interventions during 2021 and 2022 that have transformed Linnarhult into an urban common space for play and recreation. We analyse this through the concept of aesthetics that Cooper explores in his piece from 1991: 'Institutional aesthetics: The case of contestation', first published in this issue of *ephemera*, to follow the organizational processes of putting the willow at the centre of attention, and consequently organizing the planting and weaving in the common space.

In an attempt to use Cooper's theorizing analytically in a field study, our essay contributions are twofold. Firstly, we contribute to defining the organizing process of making common space through its aesthetic dimensions. We argue that the communal and aesthetic engagement offered by craft, shapes an organizing process of commoning the space that, through mundanity and impermanence, performs an open, fluid, yet committed community. Inspired by Cooper's (1991/2023) theorizing, we call this process 'communing through rhopography'. In our analysis, we recognize Lyotard's (1977) *mise-en-scène* as the active origin not only of an organization, as Burrell (2016) points out,

but also of organizing a common space, and an intentional spatial community. In other words, these craft activities remind us of Cooper's emphasis on the role of the 'agon', of the event, of the contest, which is a productive force of organizing social relations (Cooper, 1991/2023). Cooper is here mobilizing Nietzsche philosophy and his ideas about the Homeric contest to revive his fascination for the agonistic Greek ethos, in which strife and envy are considered positive feelings rather than detrimental. Thus we argue that the craft interventions at Linnarhult – that we treat as Nietzschean productive 'events' – offer an illustration of how the aesthetic process contributes to making and organizing a common space through frames, boundaries and reflections emerging from mundane and impermanent technologies (Cooper, 1991/2023). Ultimately, based on Cooper's analysis of still life, we propose the notion of commoning through institutional aesthetics.

Secondly, we propose that Cooper's theory could be a companion to be applied to a specific case study on what the shortcomings of such an endeavour might be.

The essay is structured as follows: firstly, we analyse Cooper (1991/2023) and his aesthetic approach to organizing; followed by the fieldwork where we look at crafting organizational practices to construct a common space through the involvement of plants; and conclude with our reflections on commoning through institutional aesthetics.

Crafting a common space: An aesthetic analysis

In his freewheeling notes on institutional aesthetics, Cooper (1991/2023) draws our attention to the aesthetic dimension of what he calls 'human institutions'. By institution, he refers to those things that have been instituted by humans, for example formal organizations, professions and technologies, rather than to the at-that-time nascent neo-institutional understanding of institutions. Here, Cooper (1991/2023) calls to the fact that these humanly instituted things do not only have a practical-useful function, they are also formed on an aesthetic logic. This means that they can be analysed and understood as perceived by the senses and as experienced from an internal view of their composing elements. The reference here is to Kandinsky's (1979)

reflection on ‘two ways by which we experience a phenomena – the Outer and the Inner’ (Cooper, 1991/2023: 68). Kandinsky (cited by Cooper) illustrates the difference between these two experiences by using the full stop as an example:

When we look at the point externally (via the Outer), ‘it is merely a sign serving a useful end and carries with it the element of the “practical-useful”...[it] becomes a thing of habit ... All appearances that are traditionally familiar because of their singular expression, become mute to us. We no longer react to their appeal and are surrounded by silence: so we succumb to the deadly grip of “practical-efficiency”’. (Cooper, 1991/2023: 68-69)

And Cooper continues with the possibility that sometimes arises for breaking the practical-efficiency view and opening up some room for the aesthetic attitude. It might be sickness, an accident or a war that forces us to see the Inner aspect of things, Cooper explains, and we understand from his reasoning that ‘Inner’ refers to a way of looking at things on their own merit rather than looking at them in terms of their function to produce something else. The point, or dot, thus becomes something other than just the full stop used to end a sentence. As Kandinsky (1979/1923-26), cited by Cooper, writes:

The point is the result of the initial collision of the tool with the material plane, with the basic plane. Paper, wood, canvas, stucco, et al. - may all serve as this basic plane. The tool may be pencil, burin, brush, pen, etching-point, etc. The basic plane is impregnated by this first collision; “The point is temporally the briefest form” the point is the basic building block of the line, i.e., the line is the point in movement; etc. Kandinsky writes over thirty printed pages on the Inner aspects of the point. Essentially Kandinsky is showing us how the aesthetic attribute works to reveal a complex world which is hidden from us when we rely – unconsciously and uncritically – on the practical – useful attitude. (Cooper, 1991/2023: 69)

The view shifts from looking at the function of the point to looking at the point as something that is experienced as a point and results from practices of making the point. Moving on to human institutions, Cooper invites us to make the shift from looking at institutions in terms of the *function they serve in society* to looking at institutions from the *Inner look*: how things that are instituted are made, and what they are made of. Cooper translates this view as exploring the autopoietic process of things/institutions,

autonomous processes that are internally regulated, just as Kandinsky's point receives its significance from its internal structures. They operate independently of human purposes and control. (Cooper, 1991/2023: 69)

This means, for example, in the case of a public space – such as a campo¹ in Venice (an 'extreme' example as it is pedestrian and appropriated by the people living in and visiting Venice) – that we explore in the first place what this space is made of, how it is composed in relation to the streets leading to this space, what the different material parts are that make this a space, and only secondarily its function as a public space and its different uses. This kind of 'suspended cognition', or to say it with Kant's (1790) 'aesthetic judgment', is exemplified by Cézanne's observation that he 'did not paint houses or mountains – [he] painted primarily shapes and colours which were only secondarily houses and mountains'.

Aesthetics is intended as the perception through the senses, where processes of cognitive knowing are suspended and things are trying to be understood in the world from their autopoietic processes (Cooper, 1991/2023). That is, as mentioned above, processes of autonomous making, regulation and purpose, shaped by technologies and other materialities of seeing and making. To return to Kandinsky's (1979) point, its aesthetic judgement referred to the many technologies of making it: the basic plane in paper, wood, canvas, etc., and tools including pencil, burin, brush, pen. The relationship between technology and forms of organizing has been widely explored and continually reworked in organization studies (Bryman, 2000) from multiple lenses, such as: institutional theory to look at political processes and accounts (Spicer, 2005); materialism to understand multiple, emergent, and shifting assemblages in contemporary organizing (Orlikowski, 2010, 2007); ethical issues (Bloomfield and Vurdubakis, 1999); everyday political, aesthetic, administrative performances (Jørgensen and Holt, 2019), and temporal structures (Hernes et al., 2020).

The literature of technology, in particular philosophy of technology, is very dense, and has been widely researched since the widespread diffusion of information and communication technologies (Hislop, 2013). Compared to

¹ Campo, pl. campi, is the name given to squares in Venice.

the meaning in Greek etymology, technology has changed connotation. As Cooper suggests,

the modern glossing of technology preserves this old meaning but gives it a curious twist. Instead of the concern with making present, with the art of constructing something for the apprehension of the senses, the modern interest in technology puts the stress on immediacy of use, constant availability and the easing of effort. (Cooper, 1993: 291)

In recent years, we have seen studies that promote interest in the governance and organization of technology (Ziewitz, 2016), work on the organization of innovative technologies to address climate change (Lederer and Kreuter, 2018), studies of emerging technologies and hegemonic practices (Räsänen and Linde, 2004), and analyses of how technologies shift workplace boundaries (Manley and Williams, 2022). In all this research, we are confronted with different ways of rethinking what might constitute technology and organization and the relation between, as well as how organizational actors make sense of it. When technology is called materiality in organization studies, as in the relatively recent term ‘sociomateriality’ (Orlikowski and Scott, 2008; Leonardi, 2013), its value is often analysed in terms of uses or possibilities of uses, so-called affordances, and rarely is materiality aesthetically considered. The research focus in organization studies is predominantly on how new technologies and their associated demands are enacted to allow reworking of the forms of organizing, such as new modes of governance (Neyland, 2015; Introna, 2016); new patterns of organizing (Zammuto et al., 2007); and the disruption of organizations due to new technology (Pentland and Feldman, 2007). However, these studies put stress on immediacy of use, constant availability and the easing of effort (Cooper, 1993) instead of focusing on how technology shapes realities in organizations. Hence, technology imbued with aesthetics, shapes organizations.

Aesthetic analysis of crafting activities at Linnarhult

In the following sections of this essay, we make an aesthetic analysis of the crafting activities at Linnarhult, following Cooper’s (1991/2023) idea that aesthetics means to see the elements of the world as frames, boundaries, reflections and only secondarily in their function. We will thus begin by

describing Linnarhult similarly to a Cézanne-like painting, trying to depict the area's significance from its own elements. Like Cézanne, who is mentioned by Cooper to illustrate what the aesthetics – or the *Inner look* – of things is, we want here to paint shapes and colours before houses and mountains, metaphorically.

Linnarhult still life

Linnarhult is an area in the North East of Gothenburg, populated by houses, industrial buildings and a very large green area. The part this study focuses on is a 26-hectare recreational area that has been rented from the municipality of Gothenburg by the EAC. The large green area is centred along the river Lärjeån, with a large valley popular for horse riding, sport fishing and hiking, and is crossed by the pilgrims' path that leads to Hamburg. The map in Image 1, from municipal urban planning, shows the area and shows a contrast between the industrial buildings, represented by the white squared figures, and the green zones along the river, represented by the sinuous green area adjacent to the white squares. The lines in the green area mark the difference in altitude, representing a hilly surface. The purple area is the part that has been assigned to the care of EAC. This area looks like a triangle of sorts, with two straight lines bordering the industrial buildings and the road and a curved line as the area gets closer to the river.

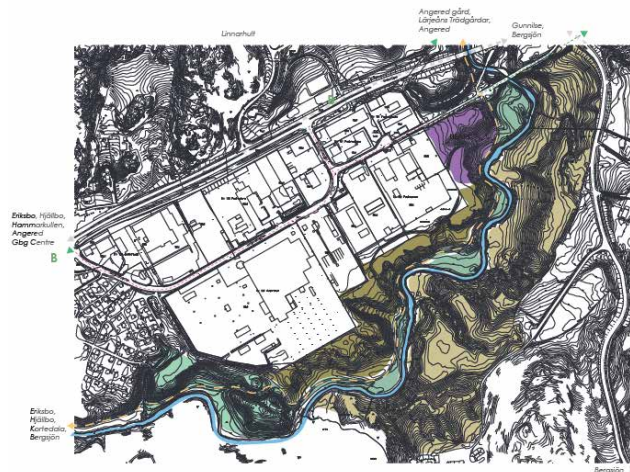


Image 1: Map of the industrial area. Source: Municipality of Gothenburg.

Linnarhult is accessible by road, and visitors usually arrive in cars and from a local bus station, with access to the top of the hill next to the industrial buildings. So, right after the entrance, looking to the right, one sees a simple wooden hut-like structure that gives visitors a sign of human intervention and life; behind them, one can glimpse not too well hidden industrial buildings (Image 2).



Image 2: Entrance of Linnarhult. Credit: Elena Raviola

The main hut-like structures cover three functions: a gathering space, like an open living room, protected from the wind and bad weather; a toilet; and storage. Looking to the left after the entrance one sees the hill going down towards the river and the horizon becomes green (Image 3).



Images 3 and 4: Linnarhult and an old willow structure. Credit: Elena Raviola

Walking in the area, there are also other visible signs of human intervention, such as a willow tunnel, mainly dedicated to children’s play (Image 4), a

prototype of a stage in wood, wooden stairs close by, a temporary hut (Images 5 and 6) and some farming traces (Images 7 and 8).



Images 5 and 6: The temporary stage and playhouse at Linnarhult. Credit: Elena Raviola



Images 7 and 8: Farming at Linnarhult. Credit: Elena Raviola

Traces of previous willow structures were left on the land, before starting the new wave of willow activities. In particular, a multipurpose playhouse had been built in collaboration with master's students in design (Image 6). This light, organic structure could be used as a hut and as a playground, next to the area of a garden for planting flowers and having chickens (Images 7 and 8).

The photographs show images of the area in early April 2021, after the winter season and at the beginning of the spring awakening, taken before the series of craft interventions that we analyse in this paper. As is visible in the photographs, the materials used to shape the space are predominantly natural materials, like wood and willow. The use of willow as a material to shape the space of Linnarhult was thus not new, as temporary willow structures had been constructed on site. The community of Linnarhult, especially the association, appreciated willow as a flexible, organic and malleable material

that could give some form to the big space without being aesthetically foreign to the green area. Thus at the beginning of 2021, when the research project started, the association expressed a desire to work with willow.

Willow was also a material that many people found accessible and easy to use, even if lacking professional craftsmanship skills. As willow blooms early in the spring, it also provides food for the insects after their winter sleep, which also connects to EAC's idea to encourage human-nature-based activities. Willow is a common plant in Sweden and is important both for biological diversity, as it is valuable for many different species as food and habitat, and for its role in Sweden's material history.

In the following sections, we analyse the making of the recreational green area as a common space through willow craft activities. In this analysis we are guided by Cooper's (1991/2023) identification of three aesthetic elements: frames, boundaries and reflections, to reason around the role of materially crafting these elements for organizing the space as common.

(Re)crafting frames: Fences and entrances

Common spaces are usually bounded by portions of urbanity. The *campi* in Venice, for example, are pieces of pavements open to the sky, surrounded by buildings and *calli*² and thereby framed by them. Linnarhult is no exception. So, the first aesthetic element we explore here is frames, constituted by the lines, structures, and materialities which divide a certain part of the world from the rest of it. Aesthetically, frames are structures of different materials and appearances, whose construction creates a 'left' and 'right', an 'inside' and 'outside'. Performatively, the frames make the space what it is and transforming them changes the space in itself.

The Linnarhult community has intentionally formulated a concern about dividing the green area from the surrounding industrial area, thus framing it, and as willow crafting activities were planned, the frames of the common space were immediate elements the community wanted to work on. In January 2021, EAC invited two architects from the local landscape architectural firm

² Calle, pl. calli, is the name of the narrow walking streets in Venice.

MARELD, and a professional craft maker to design the work with willow. Both the architects and the craft maker were familiar with Linnarhult, as they had been involved in previous activities. When EAC members met the landscape and willow specialists, they had not experienced willow and, rather than aesthetically judging the planting of willow, they wanted to discuss which functions the willow as a new plant could have in Linnarhult: hiding industrial buildings, protecting from the wind and introducing some partitions in the large space. The willow, however, bounced back against functionalism through its autopoietic processes. It grows, and its roots spread underground. So, while the plant could have a lot of functions, what would happen to the other elements of the park if the roots spread on their own, as they do? Different views, different kinds of knowledge, different voices come into play explicitly around willow: This plan becomes contested and the contests – agon in Nietzsche’s terms – perform the common space by in some way making its autopoiesis something that is in the process, something that is in the making (Cooper, 1991/2023).

This initial contestation concerning willow on site ended up with participants agreeing that they wanted to have willow structures for three main functions and in three different places:

1. Play hut on the top of the hill, visible from the entrance;
2. Willow planting as demarcation to the industrial area;
3. Larger planting with play value and weather protection (maze). (EAC website)

In these initial discussions about willow as a new plant in Linnarhult, the aesthetic understanding of the area and what willow as a new element would do to the common space was interwoven with practical – useful attitudes in a fluid but not uncontroversial manner. The functions of the willow emerged out of the aesthetic experience of the space by walking on it on a cold winter’s day, but they were also contested by imagining the autopoietic processes of the transformation of willow itself.

This intricate relation between the aesthetics and autonomy of frames and their function in the institution of a common space continued to develop in

the next phase of the process when the landscape architects sketched a proposal for the willow structures and showed these sketched maps in an online meeting with EAC members (Image 9).

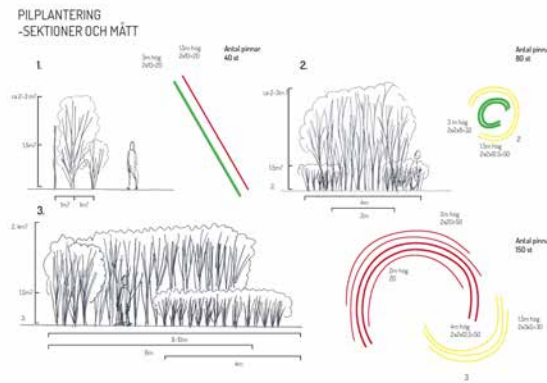


Image 9: Landscape architects' sketches of willow structures. Source: Mareld Architects.

The maps are images where lines, dots and shapes represent the recreational area of Linnarhult and not only make it easily recognizable as such by all community members, but also create a new aesthetic experience of the area that differs from one on site. The maps are small, still and tidy. Linnarhult is large, messy, windy and different from day to day. Thus the maps formed a technology of management that enables power and creates knowledge effects by appropriating represented items through a visualization rather than on a grand and potentially all-consuming scale (Cooper, 1993). Such scaling facilitates control at a distance (Cooper, 1987) and, at the same time, scaling depends on many small technological operations through sociotechnical networks (Cooper, 1992). A notable source of inspiration for these ideas is the case that Cooper and Law (1995) describe in their paper on Pasteur and the development of the anthrax vaccine for cows and sheep. Pasteur's great achievement was to move between scales. Pasteur's laboratory acted as the theatre of the proof through which the cause of anthrax – a micro-organism – could be isolated from the world of agriculture. In the lab, the cattle were miniaturized in a petri dish; the anthrax bacillus, invisible to the human eye, was made visible, easy to control, and therefore cooperative to Pasteur's inquiry. The maps drawn by the architects represented both actions and

material objects, which at times accomplishes a settled, pervasive, aesthetic form of organizing and at other times provokes fundamental questions about, for example, construction of common spaces or voicing concerns. This provokes reactions when efforts are made to move between scales, accomplishing a demarcation in the construction of the common space. Making and visualizing the map inscribed both the practical – useful view of willow and its aesthetic understanding, and the technology of maps created a new aesthetic object with its own autonomy and yet a dynamic relation with the common space, representing it, but also contributing to its performance. The visualization of willow structures by the architects made clear that these structures were not only going to fulfil a function in the area but would also constitute things-in-the-area in their own merit, ‘autonomous processes that are internally regulated’ (Cooper, 1991/2023: 69). In particular, the willow structure close to the industrial area would not only serve as a clear demarcation of the borders, but would also insert a green wall which was aesthetically in line with the recreational green area of Linnarhult and would give the sense of a natural area hiding the grey and dull industrial buildings behind.

This technology of management, as explained in Cooper’s paper, is constructed on the visualization as a way to control and manage at a distance, representing the process that is managed beyond the systemic narrative form, but revealing how the public space, the visual shape, and the making of space are important references on the lexical level of the community. The figure, the map and the drawing are performative for the systemic functionality of smoothing uncertainty and paradoxes, of bringing past and present together in a common space. Through scaling, things are brought closer and made smaller, in an attempt to control and reduce uncertainty; thus scale is enacted as a facilitation of remote control by strictly interconnecting objects and processes, privileging presence over absence (Cooper, 1987). These technologies abbreviate organizational complexity, and this helps manage the scale of the organization and the place, as well as the centre of control, translated in the way the willow workshops were organized. The aesthetics of maps – their lines, frames, dots – seems in practice hardly distinct from their function as a management tool.

Representations and technology are highly connected. Scale is a way of representing objects and organizations, and scaling is an intervention of representation as a form of *intractable* displacement, which reduces distance and increases remote control through abbreviation (Cooper, 1992). Abbreviation decreases complexity and transforms space and time, and it can be managed by technology. Cooper presents the story of the East India Company and Pasteur's laboratory as an illustration of scale being necessary for controlling at a distance a large organization through technology (ships in the case of the Portuguese, and the petri dishes in the case of Pasteur). In both cases, success was built on many small technological and technical improvements, created in an interlocking fashion. The organization of the East India Company and of Pasteur's lab was a sociotechnical network of displacements or translations, constantly transforming the boundary of the relationships (Cooper, 1992). For example, Pasteur's laboratory becomes a place where the countryside is scaled, blurring the distinction between outside and inside worlds. The anthrax bacillus, invisible to the human eyes, is upscaled and the cattle miniaturized, consequently the anthrax in the laboratory became visible, easy to control, and therefore cooperative in Pasteur's inquiry, whilst in the farms the anthrax remained an invisible lethal presence. Pasteur displaced power through technology and created forms of remote control: he created a vaccine, represented the disease on a small scale, and consequently increased the lab's power by reducing that of the microbes. The lab's success was accomplished by representing on a large scale the features of the laboratory practices, such as disinfection, inoculation technique, timing and recording (Cooper, 1992). Through representation, the big and the small become interchangeable, unknown become known, and the deferred becomes immediate (Cooper, 1992). Time and space become distributed, concentrated, visible, manageable, represented, and transformed into scaled objects and information.

Recrafting boundaries: Play hut, insect city, farm land, other areas

In April 2021, the first willow workshop was held on site in Linnarhult. Willow was planted for the first time. The period was chosen following the advice of the experts: the architects and the craft maker involved in the process. As the day was quite windy, the lounge sofa shelter offered an appreciated space for sitting and chatting before the workshop. The architects from MARELD and

the river, and in so doing perform a function in making this space common and commonable. For example, they offer people respite from wind and they signal the entrance to the area.

The first structure to be built was the play hut. The architects had prepared the space by laying plastic blankets over the grass and marking on them where the willow should be planted. The craftworker had given instructions and showed how the willow needed to be treated to be planted. The planting procedure was as follows: first (a) you spray out dots on the land where the willow should be planted. Thereafter (b) you dig holes with a metal spit, and (c) you then put the stick into the ground. Making the play hut became a process with its own purpose of planting willow, like the pencil touching the paper and making a point described in Kandinsky's letter (Cooper, 1991), not considering the future function of all willow plants together as a play hut, but only focusing on the details of how the willow gets into the soil and stays there to grow.

After about one hour, the willow hut was completed according to the instructions, which meant that all the willow plants had been planted where instructed they should go. The willow planted in a circle and woven on its tops in a diagonal direction looked like a gigantic bird cage (Image 12).



Image 12: Willow structure at Linnarhult. Credit: Elena Raviola

When the hut was finished, many participants, caught into the aesthetic process of planting the willow, began imagining how it would look when it

had grown and acquired leaves. Having completed the willow hut and some of the fences against the industrial area, all participants continued the workshop by going down to the lower entrance, by the river Lärjeån, to experiment with constructing an entrance.

Later in the Spring, the willow had been growing and greening, and was ready to be used as a craft material. On nice early summer evenings, participants gathered at the river entrance down by Lärjeån. With some brief instructions from the willow-expert craft maker, the participants immediately started the weaving and construction. They began by weaving a fence (Image 13) and then continued by building a tunnel at the entrance. There were also some smaller attempts at constructing huts.



Image 13: Willow Fence at Linnarhult in the summer. Credit: Helena Hansson.

This is a *mise-en-scène*, as Lyotard (1977) mobilizes the notion, a complex play of operations which make the basic components of the willow, the space with all its elements (grass field, river, trees), the volunteers, and the researchers, come together. The common space represents a heterogeneous field that is at the same time ‘inert’ and, because of the different historicities, interests and actions, it could be potentially ‘disordered’. The *mise-en-scène* takes hold of this space, translating the inert discourses, aesthetics, interests of different actors, and technologies into a construction. The design and the translation into shape represents transformation of heterogeneous interests into an elementary unit of the hut, which, like the anciently understood

technology, articulates the inarticulated social (and material) body (Cooper, 2009).

Crafting engaged the community in an aesthetic process in an institutional/organizational setting. For this reason, we return to Cooper's reflection on institutional aesthetics, which is a critical approach to institutions as not merely functional, but also subject to senses and perception which are fundamental aspects of human action and interaction. This helps in understanding how a public space is perceived by senses, what encounters are enacted, and how complex interactions and connections in the public spaces are revealed.

Crafting reflections: Turning back and forward

EAC could meet and greet newly recruited members in each of the workshops. The simplicity of the weaving technique made it possible for EAC participants that were amateur in craft to make their own artefacts in space. For example, one of the EAC members took the leftover material and began using the willow in her newly established insect city garden on the area. The willow weaving activity thus played an important role to create both a community of practice and a community of place (Hamdi, 2013), as the weavers, whether occasional, professional or amateurs, gathered at the end of each willow workshop and conversed amidst the woven willow about the day and their experiences. They gathered in a circle and, turning back to what had happened during the day with the crafted objects in their hands and the crafted structures under their sight, they reflected on what happened. Reflections – etymologically the acts of bending back – are the third element that Cooper discusses in his notes on institutional aesthetics (Cooper, 1993). Although in the paper he refers to reflection as an element of an artwork with the example of a still-life painting, we propose here a shift to use reflection – the act of bending back – as an aesthetic element of institutions, in the Cooperian sense of things that are instituted by humans.

At Linnarhult, during one of these circle reflections, several participants expressed appreciation for the circle, as a form of encounter that allows them to see each other and build a certain space and time for each other and for reflection. There was also appreciation for the light set of rules and basic

infrastructure of the area, including food, water, toilet, tools, material, name tags, and also people welcoming and instructing on what to do. Through crafting structures for reflections, the intentional community of this place came to be as a community. Like in a mirror, people that had just been weaving or planting willow together reflected themselves in the figure of the circle and aesthetically came to perceive themselves as a community.

In one of these moments of reflection, willow structures not only represented the time passed together to plant and weave them, and stood there as frames and boundaries in the space of Linnarhult, but also they made present the future of this space, in a time-moving action between past and future that we have elsewhere seen in relation to technology and that is constitutive of institutions (Raviola and Norbäck, 2013). At Linnarhult, the willow structures turned the community back to what they had done and forward into the question of care. Now that the structures were built and were standing there, they would not stay still, but rather, just like 17th century Dutch still-life paintings, are reminding us of the inevitability of death with a skull or a withering flower or a bug in an apple; the willow structure reminded participants of their own lives. What would happen to them? Was someone going to care for them by, for example, cutting the grass around them and checking that the willow was growing alright?

In Cooper's work, representations, forms, processes are 'immemorially connected' (1993: 279). The world is represented as, and shaped into, a stock of parts that can be recombined at will, where technology is representing relations with both people and other objects. The object, a creation of a work of art, 'now becomes a transient aggregate given to assembly, disassembly and reassembly' (Cooper, 1993: 281-282), which entails new assemblages and new forms in the common space that are not coming from within, nor located in universal laws, but actualized from the reality that folds and unfolds. Reality is not singular and absolute, but an infinite and indeterminate set of realities mediated by technologies (Cooper, 1987). Technologies are supporting the function of modern organizations, and they create and shape the actors (Cooper, 1987).

Human organisation is now more specifically the process of producing and reproducing the objects (which are also objectives) by means of which a group

or society can see or think itself; for this reason, Lévi-Strauss (1966) defined social objects as 'good to think with' rather than merely goods to use or consume. (Cooper in Burrell and Parker, 2015: 127)

The process of willow planting and weaving at Linnarhult shows how willow becomes a social object around which a community comes to be, through the aesthetic processes of craft. In a reflection post published on Facebook in February 2023, EAC writes:

In January 2021 we started planning for willow planting in Linnarhult together with [name of the craft maker] and [names of the architects]. Initially we made three constructions/plantings: a labyrinth, a wind protection and a hut. After that new plantings have come and we have learnt also to build with willow, for example together with [the artist and her studio]. The growing, green constructions in Linnarhult now needs to be cut and adjusted and when we do that we can at the same time collect willow and do something useful with the material. The idea behind the willow planting was to show children (and others) how we can grow, collect and then create together with a construction element that we have grown ourselves. (...) The willow feeds also the hungry insects that are waking up after the winter. In this way, we create our own little local ecosystem in Linnarhult that continues to grow. (Facebook, EAC public account)

This reflection after two years of work summarizes the willow crafting process and emphasizes how its autopoietic meaning in Linnarhult functions for this very common space and transforms it from within. Technological representation in social media translates the modus operandi of social life and, in this case, of the craft activities in Linnarhult, also creating a sort of punctualization (Chia and Kallinikos, 1998), and bringing forward the mute and mutable matter of the world as a distant source of infinite potential (Cooper, 2010).

Discussion: Commoning through Cooperian institutional aesthetics

In this paper, we have attempted to analyse a case of commoning relying on Cooper's insights on institutional aesthetics and on technology. We have thus focused on three aesthetic elements – frames, boundaries and reflections – to understand the making of a community and a common space at Linnarhult, a green recreational area at the periphery of Gothenburg. This offers us a new

sensitivity to institutions – in the Cooperian sense of things that are instituted (by humans) – and also to Cooper’s distinct approach. Here, we want to (1) discuss firstly our aesthetic analysis of commoning as an example of institutional aesthetics, and (2) reflect on our mobilization of Cooper’s ideas, what it does to our understanding of a concrete case and what the challenges have been.

(1) The institutional aesthetics of commoning

Theories and studies of the commons have multiplied since Ostrom’s influential work on common-pool resources governance (Ostrom, 1990), and often commons have been seen as an alternative form of organizing sociality to the dichotomy of private and public (Borch and Kornberger, 2015). Commons have been defined in many ways, but, as Hess defines them in his paper, mapping what he called ‘the new commons’ – beyond the economic definition common-pool resources and the legal one as common property – it generally refers to ‘a resource shared by a group where the resource is vulnerable to enclosure, overuse and social dilemmas. Unlike a public good, it requires management and protection in order to sustain it’ (Hess, 2008: 37).

In the common space, vision, fission and fusion meet, where multiple actors (humans, plants, insects, bacteria) are present yet not always visible to the human eye, and their absence/presence in time makes possible and shapes the constitution of the common. Presence is a form of thrownness (Weick, 2012), a sense of something that comes before us, an aesthetic experience, a sensuous knowledge, a form of power (Cooper, 1992). Thrownness means that a space enacts possible structures and futures and, as our analysis shows, things instituted in a certain space, like woven willow structures, actively define and common a space by articulating and making present both the past – of planting, weaving, growing, dying – and the future – of care or decay. Spatial and temporal presences thus intertwine through the very aesthetics of willow.

While commons have often been analysed as either abstracted self-organized collaborative arrangements among users of common-pool resources by economists like Ostrom (1990) or concrete spaces where self-organized communities have initiated activities by architects (Eizenberg, 2019), our

reliance on Cooper's association between aesthetics and human institutions – institutional aesthetics – has allowed us to see the materiality of the space and the material interventions of it, through willow, in its own autopoietic processes. At the same time commons allow us to consider these processes not only as autopoietic, but also as poietic of something else, constitutive of an intentional community of practice and place.

The emphasis on processes makes us focus on commoning rather than commons, as other scholars have proposed before us (Linebaugh, 2008; DeAngelis and Harvie, 2014). In our willow crafting experience, the making, maintaining and enacting commons in the everyday interactions and negotiations among multispecies of different actors and materialities bring to the fore the question of making commons autopoietic spaces with their own internally regulated processes, of experiencing them aesthetically. And, in turn, which communities the *mise-en-scène* of commons performs and which it does not. Institutional aesthetics allows us to reflect on these issues in new ways, as it puts attention on material elements not only for their functional performativity, but primarily for their autonomous life as things.

(2) Cooper's ideas in practice?

In this essay, we have mobilized Cooper's ideas to analyse our observations from a field study – the case of commoning processes at Linnarhult – and to shape our understanding of concrete activities we witnessed and sometimes even participated in. So, we want to conclude with a reflection on what we have seen through Cooper and how we have perhaps audaciously bent his notes to our purpose.

Firstly, we have read Cooper's writings and conceived their use in a sort of flower mode. The centre of the flower, where the reproductive pistils sit, has been the freewheeling notes on institutional aesthetics in the unpublished conference paper presented at Utrecht in 1991, entitled 'Institutional aesthetics: The case of "contestation"', and made available by this very special issue's call. Around this, we have drawn in and attached to the centre many petals from other writings by Cooper and, associatively, also by other scholars. While we have elsewhere used other pieces of Cooper's writing (Gasparin and Neyland, 2022), we felt here particularly appealed to by the

Pindaric flight that Cooper attempts in his freewheeling notes to connect the analysis of Cézanne's, Kandinsky's and the 17th century Dutch still-life artworks and the understanding of human institutions. In our own attentiveness to aesthetics and tiredness for much of the arid and self-referential organizational research on institutions, we have thus been seduced by Cooper's ideas.

Secondly, this has indeed not been a smooth process of exploration and we might have bent ideas, catching on and expanding glitches in Cooper's freewheeling notes. However, in trying to choose notions to apply and make work through the mess of our fieldnotes, we delineated a number of anchors in Cooper's writing: for example, the distinctions between aesthetics and functionality as ways of seeing institutions, and the illustration with Kandinsky's (1979) exploration of the point, Nietzsche's ideas of the contest as productive, and the notion of autopoiesis as central to aesthetics. We have worked with these ideas and their associations sometimes more analytically and sometimes more evocatively and even metaphorically in a sort of explorative writing. The writings of Cooper, with its attention to the shapes of 17th century still-life and then its jump onto the consequences for human institutions, inspired us in its poetic power, but also challenged our usual analytical makings of scholarly texts.

Lastly, in writing and reading interactively our fieldnotes and Cooper's texts, we quite likely ended up betraying both Cooper's neat ideas and our ethnographic practice. Particularly, although appealing in theory, the distinction between an aesthetic view and a practical – efficient/functional view of institutions was particularly challenging to practice and to see in practice. We tried to describe the aesthetics of willow planting and crafting as an institutional process before reasoning on its functionality, but we realized that the very aesthetics and autopoiesis of willow is functional in the sense that it produces a community of practice and place, and this production also partly shapes and intervenes in the aesthetics of willow and the common space. In other words, in practice, aesthetics and the practicality – efficiency of institutions – things that are instituted – and their respective performativity are in more complex and articulated relationships than distinction or opposition, and this calls for further exploration, keeping Cooper's unique eye on materiality and technology.

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the author

Elena Raviola is Torsten and Wanja Söderberg Professor in Design Management at the University of Gothenburg and director of the Business and Design Lab. Her research focuses on the organization of professional work in times of digitalization, with a special focus on the cultural and creative industries. She has conducted extensive ethnographic research on media companies in Italy, France and Sweden. Currently she is involved in a number of research projects on the role of design and art work in the making of public space and on the consequences of intelligent algorithms in the public sphere. She is also involved in H2022 Hephaestus.

Email: elena.raviola@gu.se

Marta Gasparin is Associate Professor in the Department of Business, Humanities and Law at Copenhagen Business School. Her background is in management of creative industries (Bocconi and Copenhagen Business School) and philosophy of aesthetics (Kingston University). Her research draws from Science and Technology Studies (STS) and continental philosophy, and combines studies of design management, innovation, and slow movements with organisation studies. Designing in the Anthropocene, ethical sustainability, slow design-driven innovation, and the aesthetics of craft are at the core of her investigations. She is currently leading the H2022 Hephaestus.

Email: mga.bhl@cbs.dk

Helena Hansson is a lecturer in design at the Academy of Art and Design, University of Gothenburg. Her research is pivoting around how a designerly approach in innovation and the role of design are contributing to sustainable change actions in situations characterized by institutional voids and complexities, resource scarcity and lack of affordances. She has developed methods of co-crafting in her participatory research in Kenya and Sweden and is currently involved in H2020 Hephaestus.

Email: helena.hansson@hdk.gu.se