



Fig. 1

Contemporary commoning practices in the Alps: Co-creating spaces for imagination and action

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The Lagarina Valley in the Italian Alps is a region rich with practitioners striving to create physical and social spaces for imagination, action, and hope in times of environmental and social crises. This abundance of creative thinkers might not be immediately visible to the untrained eye; however, despite the valley's agricultural and industrial domination, limited public education system, and predilection for the population to conform to conventional consumerist lifestyles, a transformative paradigm shift is being cultivated in the region.

This valley, where biodiversity loss and climate crises are a fast-moving reality, is also where my feminist-oriented design research lab, the "*Alpine Community Economies Laboratory*,"¹ was established. It is in this valley, where rural and urban practices intermingle, that I strive to contribute to a dynamic assemblage of commoning practices showcasing how more caring ways of sustaining livelihoods are possible. I do so by contributing to the wider eco-social movement through design-led participatory methods, creating spaces with a caring mindset in the face of a non-linear tomorrow. My work aims to support various civic and

public actors to achieve their goals for a more equitable and sustainable future.

What I would like to share in this text are some key working principles and community projects that underpin how I contribute to the collective, regenerative work already underway in the valley. I will introduce the working principles of "commons" and "community economies" that permeate my work, subsequently explaining how these principles manifest themselves as theory-practice relays (aka practical projects in a close and creative conversation with theory) within (and via) the community academy *La Foresta*²—a physical space and a collective that I co-founded.

Commons and community economies as working principles

The concept of the "commons," the first point of orientation in my contribution to the valley, has been defined as a "commonwealth" (i.e., land, water, houses, and other forms of wealth governed by a community of users) through processes of negotiation, care, and interaction (i.e., acts of commoning³). Personally, I think of com-



Fig. 2

mons as multispecies communities that interact with matter to regenerate and sustain their interdependent livelihoods in ways that allow all community members to thrive. This interaction should be conducted with care while benefitting living beings and ecosystems outside its boundaries.

When I first encountered the commons concept fifteen years ago, it became like a guiding star, allowing me and others to imagine and experience different ways of living. After investigating the connection between this concept and the Alps, much of what I had experienced as a child without understanding its value became clearer. For example, spending days in the forest near the village with my grandparents gathering firewood, watching my neighbors taking the cows home during a summer spent on the high alpine meadows, or hiking along the old irrigation channels while admiring their ingenuity—all these memories could be appreciated more fully by understanding the concept of the “commons.” My desire now is to care for this Alpine heritage via art- and design-led engagements while “queering” it with feminist and post-humanist approaches; this will enable myself and others to live within an

empowering kind of “commons-present” in the Alpine region. Moreover, it is hoped this will allow others in future to inherit a positive and sustainable commons culture and infrastructure with which to build their lives and activism within and around.

Community economies—my second point of orientation—can be defined as economies that care for the well-being of humans and more-than-human others, or those that foster sustaining interdependencies between living beings.⁴ To me, the “community economies” approach is a powerful tool that fuels transformative imagination and action for several reasons. First, it defines the economy as “all the activities we do that sustain our livelihoods,” encompassing diverse activities that are non-monetary, informal, and mostly side-lined or instrumentalized in service to “the real economy” by other economic theories.⁵ Second, its intellectual standpoint is one of openness, curiosity, and indeterminacy; rather than looking for problems in a political system, it encourages individuals to seek out practices that defy the capitalist logic of profit, separation, and accumulation in the “here” and “now.” Third, with its post-humanist stance, it strives to take other living beings

(e.g., animals, plants, fungi, and bacteria) into account *with*—not *as*—resources merely existing for human use, but as co-creators of their livelihoods with agency, preserving the interdependent ecosystems that sustain life.⁶

La Foresta: A hybrid research assemblage relaying theory and practice

The community academy *La Foresta* is a hybrid research assemblage that emerged in 2015 out of community engagement, relationship building, and continual assessment of local needs in the Lagarina Valley. *La Foresta's* literal meaning in our local dialect is “the female foreigner”; however, it further acknowledges the forest as an ecosystem and a place to construct alternative futures. The practice itself is a self-governed assemblage of people, practices, spaces, materials, and ideas brought together in a 150-square-meter space within Rovereto train station. From 2017 onwards, *La Foresta*, steadily developed from a collective desire among its members to create a community resource connecting forward-looking changemakers in the valley; i.e., people actively contributing to the creation of alternative economies and practices of living that support the well-being of people and other living beings in the valley. The

platform was intended to also be attentive to interdependencies with other localities.

Currently, within *La Foresta*, there are about fifteen people actively contributing to this collective effort daily, with another twenty-five engaging more informally. This dynamic group of people range in age from their early twenties to their mid-sixties and are knowledgeable in fields as diverse as agroecology, critical pedagogy, transformative social work, eco-social design, mental health, and herbology.

Sebastiano Moltreri, a human rights worker, artist, and inhabitant of *La Foresta*, believes a visual representation of the community academy and its organizational dynamics would be chaotic: “from bubbles to meteors, from circles to circumferences, from 2D to 3D figures to figures that are outside graphic representation but you know are there.” In fact, each contributor has a slightly different idea of what *La Foresta* is and what it does. This diversity makes the space remain vibrant and empowering for our wide range of needs and interests. These include a desire to transition the valley into an agro-ecological landscape, find ways of supporting local mental health by treating it as a “commons,” efforts to mitigate and adapt to climate change, actively including young people in the process of shaping the future of the valley, nurturing



Fig. 3



Fig. 4

improved biodiversity, creating spaces for people from diverse backgrounds to meet and support each other, and ensuring queer, working class, and migrant people have better access to affordable housing, among other endeavors.⁷

Chiara Bombarda, who contributed to *La Foresta* during a voluntary social year while searching for a purposeful profession, describes it as a relational space in which “you can test yourself, always supported by someone and always finding someone who opens a new door for you, allowing you to discover that there is more to the world than you have imagined.” Her description grounds what *La Foresta* implicitly aims to achieve, namely, stimulating the imagination of people in the valley to see how life could be different (and much improved) if we collectively (re)organized our livelihoods. This could be realized through practices that allow life in its multiple forms to regenerate and thrive more naturally instead of focusing on competitiveness and maximizing the valley for profit.

Therefore, for most contributors at *La Foresta*, we must engage equally on a conceptual and practical level to explore how life could be positively changed in our

valley and beyond, continuously relating theory and practice. In the process, we must work together creatively and courageously to nurture ourselves and others, embracing the multiple ideas of a regenerative present and future.

Interdependence and enlivenment: Ways of fostering territorial futures

With our design and commoning practices in the Lagarina Valley, at *La Foresta* we often remind ourselves that we are committed to a marathon and not only a sprint; it typically takes years to develop a project from mere intuition and desire to realizing a concrete initiative. We are glad to have the privilege (and endurance) of being able to remain in one place, allowing relations between people to grow and become more complex and for efforts to solidify and build through more radical approaches. Personally (and as a collective), we believe in revolutionary world views, primarily those of interdependence⁸ (i.e., that everything is connected as a pre-condition of being and that this is a beautiful thing to acknowledge and engage with),



Fig. 5

and enlivenment⁹ (i.e., the idea that we can change our ways of living to contribute to our feeling of aliveness and that of other beings). Ultimately, this can be realized through implementing everyday practices that encourage life to thrive.

With our assemblage of activities experimenting with theory-practice relays, we desire to be actors fostering enlivened territorial spaces for the future. We are convinced that this rootedness and connectedness we experience daily through our work as a collective can support a different approach to how this region could be co-shaped to support the well-being of its multispecies inhabitants and their translocal connections. We are currently wondering how this process of multispecies grassroots engagement and transformation can be integrated into a pluralistic, regional, and long-term vision that should support as many actors as possible to co-shape this valley. We are exploring how we can “dance” with public administrators and local politicians to promote interdependence and enlivenment as a core organizing principle of territorial futures. Ultimately, we are working towards finding ways to use our experiences to contribute to enlivening how life in the valley is

Fig. 1
A Community Economies Retreat exploring traditional land-based commons.

Fig. 2
The Lagarina Valley in the Italian Alps.

Fig. 3
The La Foresta collective organizes an Eco Lab skills sharing workshop twice a week at the Rovereto train station.

Fig. 4
The Comunità Frizzante produces fizzy drinks while building the community.

Fig. 5
Children playing and learning outdoors as part of the *Sottobosco* education project.

governed and administrated and how we can invite others to open up to dynamic multispecies connections.

We acknowledge that there are many different modes of living and relating, of governing and administering. Currently, these desires are actualized all too often with short-term thinking, such as focusing on individual well-being. This can become akin to a “private island” upon which people may take actions such as denying scientific facts, abstaining from voting in public elections, or voting but for “right” and “hard right” political parties. Those entities promise ways forward for humanity that avoid the process of change, implying that the problem is not the fault of the individual and their participation in Western imperial ways of life; instead, the blame is assigned to “others” (near or far) who are perceived as a threat. These shortcuts profoundly negate interdependence and enlivenment, thus worsening the situation through modes of practice that perpetuate disconnection between people, ultimately degrading the web of life that sustains us all. In this scenario, it is empowering to me and others within *La Foresta* to see ourselves as part of a genealogy of commoners keeping practices of commoning alive in this territory and elsewhere in the world, honoring the interdependence between all living beings. This allows us to feel connected with previous efforts cultivated for centuries in the Alps and worldwide through practices which are not only resisting the status quo but also thriving in spite of it.

1 Bianca Elzenbaumer, “Alpine Community Economies Laboratory,” 2019, accessed April 25, 2024, www.alpinecommunityeconomies.org.

2 “La Foresta - Accademia Di Comunità,” accessed February 23, 2021, <https://laforesta.net/>.

3 Massimo De Angelis, *Omnia Sunt Communia: On the Commons and the Transformation to Post-capitalism* (London: Zed Books, 2017).

4 Martina Artmann, “Human-Nature Resonance in Times of Social-Ecological Crisis – a Relational Account for Sustainability Transformation,” *Ecosystems and People* 19, no. 1 (December 31, 2023): 2168760.

5 Community Economies Collective, “Community Economies Institute,” accessed January 8, 2019, <http://www.communityeconomies.org/about/community-economies-institute>.

6 Community Economies Collective, “Community Economies Research and Practice,” accessed April 13, 2020, <https://www.communityeconomies.org/about/community-economies-research-and-practice>.

7 August 31, 2023, <https://laforesta.net/progetti/>. The quotation by Sebastiano Moltrer is taken from a WhatsApp conversation with the author about La Foresta.

8 Arturo Escobar, *Designs for the Pluriverse: Radical Interdependence, Autonomy, and the Making of Worlds*, (Durham: Duke University Press Books, 2018).

9 Andreas Weber, *Enlivenment: Towards a Fundamental Shift in the Concepts of Nature, Culture and Politics*, Ecology Series, vol. 31 (Berlin: Heinrich Böll Stiftung, 2013).