

# NEW X COMMON — ERS

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# NXC: *COMING TO— GATHER*



People came together as the *New Cross Commoners* with a desire to get to know the neighbourhood of New Cross and the many activities organized by its inhabitants to change it from below and for the better. For many of us the neighbourhood was before simply part of a trajectory from home to the workplace, a place to buy things or have a drink with friends. We came together as the New Cross Commoners to learn from forms of self-organization in New Cross, but also in an attempt to organise our lives differently and contribute to the existing collective experiences happening in the area.

For this purpose the notion of the commons and the practice of commoning have been very important. A common is a resource that can be material (land, water, houses, food) or immaterial (knowledge, health care), the care of which is organized collectively by a non-homogeneous community through a process of commoning. Commoning is the act of sharing a resource against the control of the State and its hierarchical forms of organization, and against privatization and the exploitation of the market. Commoning always involves a more or less visible struggle against the market and the State. Examples of commons and commoning in New Cross are the New Cross Learning (knowledge), Sanford Housing Coop (housing), communal gardens like Common Growth (food), and the New Cross poetry workshop (caring).

When we meet as New Cross Commoners we try to do different things: we visit a communal place and get introduced to it by those organising it, we often do some physical exercises to warm up and break the ice since there are often new people coming to the meetings, we engage with the doings of the place we visit or we organise some activity ourselves, we read a text together and discuss it in relation with the place visited, we often share food, and we end up in a pub.

The New Cross Commoners is also a free school, it involves a learning that is different from the academic one. Theoretical texts are activated in relation to concrete situations and places, rather than reduced to self-reflective knowledge as so often happens at the university. Knowledge is acquired and developed on site and by reflecting on our personal experiences in the neighbourhood. When we meet we also try to experiment with a different language to communicate, alternative from a formal or academic one and from the language we might use at the pub or in other social occasions: it is a matter of listening and taking care of each other's hesitations whilst discussing together.

When we meet we also imagine how to live in New Cross in a different manner and how to start changing the neighbourhood by perceiving it in different ways, together with other people.

The New Cross Commoners is a lifelong project in the sense that it coincides with our lives: it is important not to do things in a hurry, otherwise you risk burnout. It is better to go along with the collective energies available and to reproduce them by generating some joy whilst getting together.

The 'we' of the New Cross Commoners is an open one, there are often new people coming to the meetings, and that's brilliant, so do come along

yourself! We try to have organizational tasks and responsibilities circulating amongst us, following our different interests, competences and desires. For example, the one who is interested in a specific exploration organizes it, with the help of some of the others.

We gather on a website traces of what we learn and do because in such a way people can follow how the process of the New Cross Commoners unfolds, and they might also want to make use of the tools we are using and developing – this availability has to do with commoning! Also, to some extent, and according to our energies, we try to relate with what other comrades do outside New Cross. All this is important for the commons to circulate.

There are a series of open questions the New Cross Commoners try to engage with from the beginning. Important questions concern the relation with activist struggles in the neighbourhood and in London and the relation with community organizing in New Cross. The New Cross Commoners is not directly engaging in activist organization, it does not focus on a specific problem to set up a campaign, but still tries in its own way to engage with problems and urgencies. Some of us consider the New Cross Commoners a kind of activism, in the sense that it involves, and has to involve, a strong commitment to produce an emancipatory socio-political transformation. But the

New Cross Commoners is not activism or community organizing if by this we understand something organized by a team of experts for the benefits of some other people: we start from the assumption that everybody can be an “expert” and that (almost) everybody is “disadvantaged”, although in very different ways and to different extents.

Another open question for the Commoners is about the alternative between reclaiming, occupying, squatting on one side, and fundraising and getting authorizations to use spaces and other resources on the other. We have been recently thinking of trying to get a space from Goldsmiths or the Council, since this would give the Commoners more visibility, continuity and consistency, and to do some fundraising to cover costs like food, travel expenses for guests, or the production of a publication like this one to make our activities known in the neighbourhood. To occupy a building has advantages and disadvantages that are difficult to weigh before taking action: on one side the intensity of the political engagement would increase and could attract more and different kinds of people, on the other, occupying would require more energy, involving a more continuous commitment and most probably a very nomadic and precarious existence. The question is open: it would surely be useful to think the two sides of it not in opposition and to consider the legal and the illegal not as separated alternatives excluding each other.

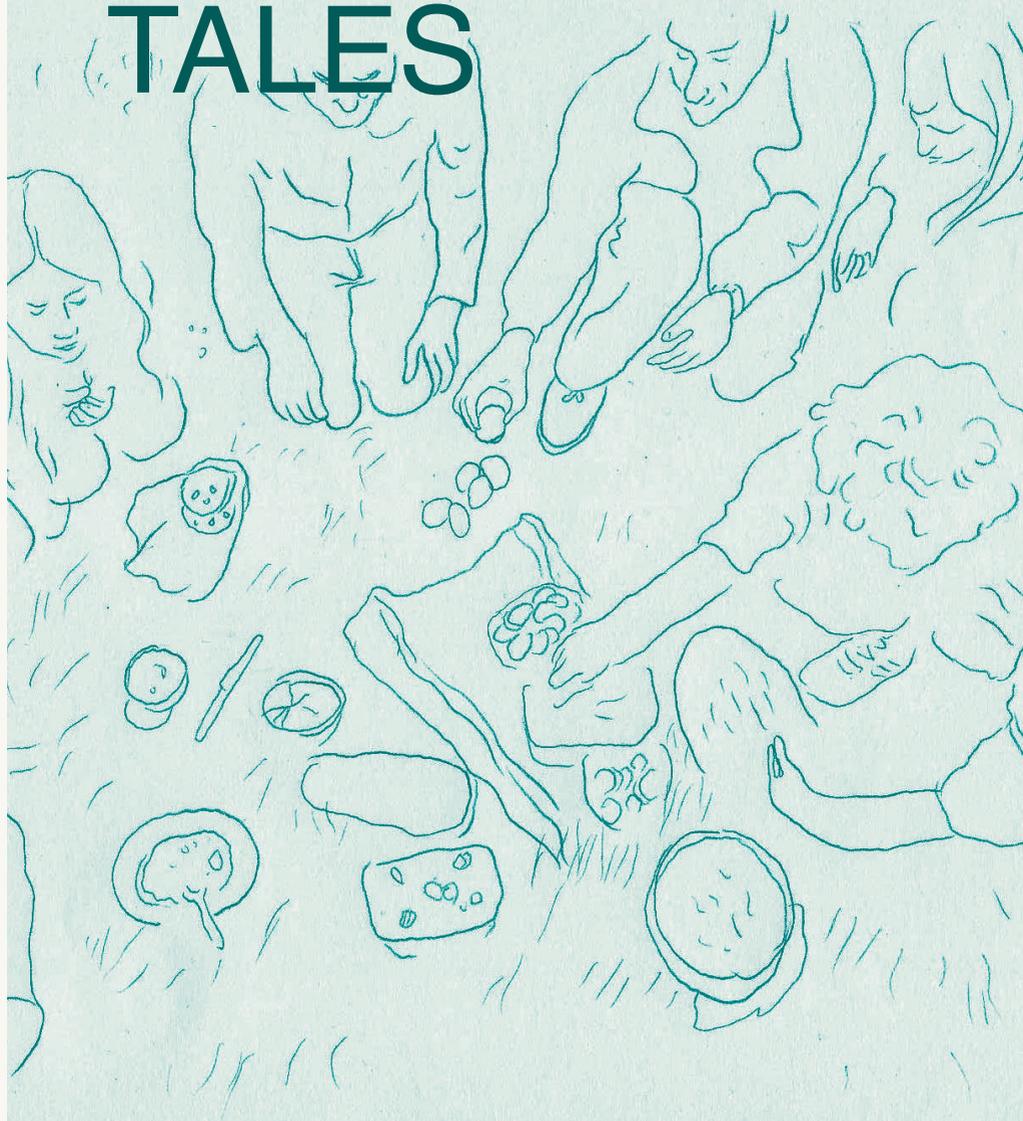
If the near future of the New Cross Commoners will not gather around a physical space we will find other ways to engage with different kinds of people in order to increase the range of our diversities: of class, race, gender, age, ability and so on.

This is important not just because the encounter of differences is potentially revolutionary, but also because those differences populate the neighbourhood (and the planet), and in order to have something like a commoning the diversity of a place has to be taken into account.

This has been the aim at the horizon of the commoners since the beginning: to produce commons, to institute commons, and to gradually free ourselves from the slavery of wage labour and the market. In order to do this we will crystallise our desires around resources to collectivize, and use the labour of commoning to sustain our lives, always making sure to turn work into something other than work - into something that would function similarly to how our meetings function: we do not work – we organize together, we do things together, we read together, we eat together, we can have fun together, we learn together, engaging with other people, struggles and situations.

- Contributions by** *Assembly, Sharon Borthwick, Orsalia Dimitriou, Lawrence Dodd, Bianca Elzenbaumer, Caterina Giuliani, James Holland, Dan Lee, Alice McHugh, Gaja Mežnarić Osole, New Cross Learning, Paolo Plotegher, Poetry Group, Manuel Ramos, Rosanna Thompson*
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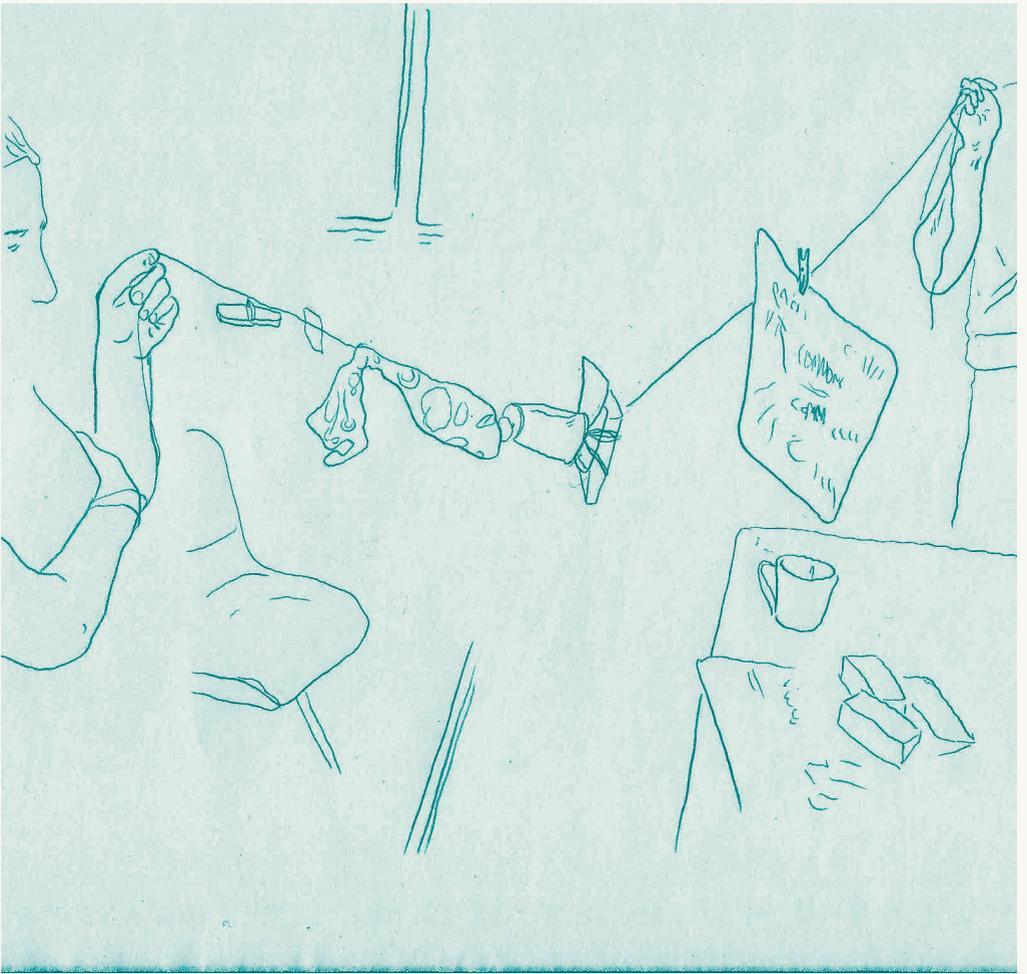
# COMMON — TALES



‘Circulation of the Commons’ was a day of presentations and hands on workshops organized by the New Cross Commoners. Throughout the day we discussed ways for the commons to proliferate and circulate and we attempted a translation of our ideas into models built with coloured papers, cardboards, woodsticks and other material. The three interconnected stories you can read here were written as a way to take the outcomes of that workshop further by using a different medium.

I

It was a chilly breeze of air that interrupted Martin's daydreaming. Directing his gaze away from the wet London panorama that spread at his feet back to his book pages he continued reading: "*The desire to see the city preceded the means of satisfying it. Medieval or Renaissance painters represented the city as seen in a perspective that no eye enjoyed. This fiction already made the medieval spectator into a celestial eye. It created gods. Have things changed since technical procedures have organised an 'all seeing power'? The totalising eye imagined by the painters of earlier times lives on in our achievements. The same*



*scopic drive haunts users of architectural productions by materialising today the utopia that yesterday was only painted.”*

“So true”, thought Martin looking again at the wet rooftops that were glittering in the evening sun, two and a half hundred meters below him. *“The voyeur god created by this fiction, who like Schreber’s god, knows only cadavers ....”* “Damned”, cursed Martin, stopping his reading in the middle of the sentence, “this De Certeau was a such pessimist! I mean, he had every reason to be as in his time the birdeye view was homonymous to tall commercial buildings, authority and the concept maps of city planners but... it is so hard to feel that way nowadays, when enjoying the city from every possible perspective from all the public terraces in the South.”

Martin rose from his chaise longue and looked at the plaque in the wall as to verify his thoughts: “London’s View is a Common Good. Shard’s Public Terrace, Public, Network and Common Spaces, South London, 2013. Well it is not a long way since when you had to pay a ticket to enjoy this view... how completely

absurd that was,” he continued to think while descending from the top terrace. In the building he passed the workers cooperative platform and their nursery and decided to continue the descent using the lifts. Outside he picked up a pink common-use bike from the bike rack. He felt the pink suited the afternoon light while reminding him “only to think that back then you even had to pay to use a bike that was sponsored by a bank, people were nuts for putting up with it.” “And now back to my everyday, ground level practice, Mr. De Certeau,” thought Martin as he cycled towards Nina’s house.

Laurie Grove House was similar to old style developments. Nina and her flatmates still had to pay rent, plus two of the owners had bought their flats, yet twenty percent of the building was common space as defined by law, plus their public terrace. Laurie Grove House tenants shared the garden, two communal living rooms and a small nursery. Martin found Nina in her favourite position, by the window, holding a small model that she had just made, as the number of scattered scrap material around her suggested. “This is for the future river floating co-op!” said Nina dropping the model in a bucket filled with

water. Martin could not but laugh at his friend's perpetual creativity. Sam and Lexi, who were also working in the room, were less amused by the splash that dangerously approached their laptops. "Nina, instead of playing with the model," remarked Lexi, "we should finish those plans. In a couple of hours we will have the Deptford meeting here and I certainly want to join them instead of drawing till dawn." "Right," said Nina while straightening up, "Martin what did you say you wanted?"

Carrying the plants that Nina gave him in his bike basket, Martin cycled towards the New Cross housing co-op, his home for more than ten years. Their garden was lusher than Laurie Grove House's one, but less edible, that's why he was bringing some tomato plants. The young jasmine that was on the basket was an extra gift for his little daughter. He thought again of the past when companies were allowed to monopolise common edible plants as their own property and he shuddered in horror. "Why on earth am I remembering those dark ages today? It must be the Shard's dirty commercial past," thought Martin, "It also happened to me when I visited the London Dungeon."

He left the bike on the neighbourhood's cycling station and walked the last meters to the coop. He crossed the common kitchen and went straight to the garden. Ten set of eyes got immediately fixed on him. "You are late for the assembly!", said Christian. "I might be, dear," answered Martin, "but look what I brought for the garden! Am I excused now?" "Only if you cook your famous risotto for everybody tonight!", replied Christian. Looking at the assembly of his friends in the garden Martin thought "De Certeau would be really happy with our everyday practices! If only he had known that the future would be brighter!"

## II

Nina and Lexi arrive together at the Old Sainsbury's, New Cross' biggest ex-supermarket. The supermarket had been occupied for ten years now, the roof turned into a communal garden and the carpark, drilled during the summer solstice night of 2015 by a local gang engaged in the reclaim the street/land/houses movement, is now covered in trees that destroyed the concrete with their roots. The forest has become

a sort of extension of the New Cross Cutting, opened now every single day. Vegetables, pulses and grain on the roof and fruits in the old car park: there's no need for supermarkets anymore.

The interior of the supermarket became initially the New Cross Free Cinema, where films from the looted collection of Goldsmiths audiovisual library were screened every night. Now the cinema is still active but the space is used as a communal kitchen and laundrette as well. There are also mattresses for people to sleep over. The use of the space is always rediscussed and under negotiation because it's important for people to use it in response to changing needs and desires. The meetings where those decisions are taken are not always easy, but people know how important it is for conflicts to emerge and to be able to deal with them. It wasn't easy at first, but this is something you learn to deal with, as Lexi and Nina know very well.

Initially the police tried to brutally repress the occupation but the occupiers resisted for months, mainly thanks to the massive solidarity of other neighbours, fed up with all that grey

concrete covering so much space in the very middle of New Cross. So, after a few months of struggle, Mr. Sainsbury saw himself forced to donate the property to the people of New Cross who declared it a common good.

Nina and Lexi climbed to the roof to meet Sam. They found her digging a bed of potatoes together with some other comrades. The three friends went back downstairs to take a trolley for a ride. Most of Sainsbury's trolleys had been transformed into something else: mobile gardens, mobile homes, mobile breweries ... For Nina, Lexi and Sam to take a trolley for a ride has become a daily activity, it is when they take time to be together, socializing with passersby or just chatting amongst themselves. Sometimes they bring their kids along. In the trolley they can carry around different things every day, sometimes food, sometimes books they read together, sometimes a range of medical herbs in case people they encounter need them. Nina, Lexi and Sam don't see these walks around the neighbourhood as a sort of social service. To carry food, books, plants to share is a way for them to get in contact with different people every day, black, white,

Asians, boys and girls, happy people, sad people, common people, little kids, dogs, cats and spiders.

During their walks it sometimes happens that they find themselves with the trolley under a shadowy tree whilst no one else is around. This is when they often stop and kiss each other with great pleasure and joy.

### III

“Right, shall we check again we have everything?”, asked Lexi. Sam reopened her backpack, bemused by, but also admiring, Lexi’s organisational zeal. “Here I have: water, bread, cheese, matches, the leaflets, the books, another jumper, shopping bags, and my sleeping bag”, she replied. “And I have: more water and bread, the cans, notebooks and pencils, some clothes and my sleeping kit: sleeping bag, ear plugs and face mask”. Lexi, checking his pockets, added “and we both have our old documents, just in case”. “We are ready to go!” Outside the house Lexi first checked the pink bikes to see if they were ready for a long

ride, and then they cycled down the street, the morning air refreshing their faces. After a few minutes they could see that a large group of cyclists had already gathered outside the Old Sainsburys Forest. Lexi felt relieved while approaching the group, “the comrades from the North will be happy to receive all this support”. Soon the army of cyclists was speeding down Old Kent Road, gathering further cyclists along the network of Old Supermarkets Forests: the Old Aldi Forest, the Old Asda Forest, the Old Tesco Forest.

Different songs were sung by the group, but the voices grew increasingly silent as they approached Westminster bridge. All the bridges were known for being informal checkpoints in which the Northern Police controlled the comings and goings of the inhabitants of the South. It was better to keep a low profile when crossing the river, especially since events in the North were making the Government and the Market Authority nervous. A few blocks away from the bridge they decided to divide the group to attract less attention: some went to Vauxhall Bridge, some to Waterloo bridge. Lexi and Sam, and the rest of the Westminster group,

took out of their backpacks some shopping bags, filled them with food and hung them from the handlebars of their bicycles. It was a simple disguise for crossing the bridge: with shopping bags they could pass for legitimate Northerners, or as Southerners coming to sell food in the Northern Markets.

The crossing of the bridge went without major problems, they just had to follow the usual Northern procedure for the monitoring of citizens. They all had documents, carefully forged, ready for the long inspection: financial identity card, credit profile certificate and National Health Management membership card.

Once cleared the group regathered in Parliament Square. Sam looked at the buildings around the square. They were almost invisible behind the huge fences defending them from citizens. Only their roofs were visible, and the clock of Big Ben. Sam remembered the stories her grandmother used to tell her about the night when it all started in that square, how a specific protest against the commodification of education was aggressively repressed here, prompting a national revolt against the political system

of representation that led to the formation of autonomous common zones across the country. Lexi brought her back to the present: “Sam, let’s go, the group is moving on”. Cycling through the central streets of the North was a strange experience these days, they were almost deserted, the air was calm and tense, as if something were about to happen. Soon they could see their goal, the occupied Harrods Department Store. The spaces around the building contrasted with the moonlike streets they had just passed by: a multitude of people were engaged in various activities. The building looked beautiful with many plants growing out of every window, the trees on the roof and its strange artworks hanging everywhere. Lexi and Sam parked the bikes against an Egyptian golden sphinx that seemed to welcome the participants. Sam looked at Lexi and around her. She clasped her hands in excitement. It was her first time participating in a General Assembly for the Commoning of North London and she had a lot to say.



NXC INTER—  
VIEWS:

— *NEW X*

*LEARNING*

— *ASSEMBLY*

— *POETRY*

*GROUP*

— *CAHOOTS*

These are interviews with some of the many collectives and organizations in New Cross that contribute to the liveliness of the neighbourhood and who all experiment with forms of collective, bottom-up organising in an urban context. To publish these interviews is a way of making people know about their activities, to better understand what each collective is doing and where connections could be established.

# NEW X LEARNING

*“Because we can’t pay — sometimes we can have up to ten volunteers in one day — if we were giving five pounds expenses to each volunteer ...”*

*“We are at the moment at a crux because we actually have to find fifty pounds a week just for gas and electricity.”*

*Gill Hart*

## **What is the form of organization of New Cross Learning?**

New Cross Learning is organised through a management group in which there are about ten of us. It's quite a variety of people. We have on our management group an accountant who keeps our finances in order. We have to have an audit each year. We have a constitution. We're right in the middle of applying for charity status which will be to our advantage because we can get bigger grants and maybe we can get funding for the sort of day to day running of New Cross Learning which at the moment is basically shared between myself and Kathy as co-chairs. But it would be nice if we had somebody who could take on that responsibility. There's the idea – that it's going to be a legacy.

## **Would you say it is a form of self-organization?**

### **How do you take decisions?**

We're not governed by any 'body' we are governed by the management group of NXL. Kathy and I [co-chairs] will make day to day decisions; we'll sometimes make day to day decisions on quite big issues. It would be almost impossible to put every decision through the management. If there is a controversial issue it goes on to an email – how do people feel about this? Are we in agreement? Who disagrees? We take a consensual view, we don't just plunder into something and think 'that's what we want'.

### **How do you deal with formal and informal hierarchies?**

The hierarchy is just that if you're on the management group you have a vote. Only people on the management are given the keys and are allowed to open and close up the library, we made that decision a long while ago. In fact we're now thinking of changing this rule but we can't decide that ourselves, we'd have to go to the group to decide that.

**Are the activities your organization engages with producing something like an income that would help sustain the project and the life of people taking part in it?**

We don't have volunteers expenses, we just have food privileges and cups of coffee and tea. That's the only expense we pay. When we have volunteers here we always say, where do you live, do you live locally. We are at the moment at a crux because we actually have to find fifty pounds a week just for gas and electricity. A lot of that is by selling books in the bookshop and Paul is very good at selling books online. It's just one way of getting money but it is becoming big business for us.

A lot of our volunteers are on benefits. If they've got to go and sign on or whatever they have to do they can go and do that, there's no legal obligation that they have to be here ... and you know, they can keep warm here, they can eat here, it's like a shelter for them really. To be truthful it is for me too – coming out of the cold weather – if I was sitting at home I would run up a lot of costs on heating, or I would be cold. Cold, bored and probably going out of my mind!

**Do you get funding from someone?**

We're not funded by anyone at the moment. We have received funds for projects from a number of organisations. Telegraph Hill Ward Assembly kicked us off with £5000 pounds for projects which helped us to get people into the library and using the library. That lasted us almost a whole year. We were able to entice people in, use the money for arts and crafts projects, during holiday times, pay for street dance, pay for quite a few activities really – we used the money wisely. Then we did get a huge £10000 grant from New Cross Gate Trust and that was the first real 'funding' but when you have a fund you have specifications you have to fulfil. So we had a brief description of what it had to be – some of the funding went for publicity and that's why

we bought the printer. A lot of the assets were taken out of the library by the council when they closed it. The printer is another income generating thing for us; we get quite a bit of money from that. But we're also able to publicise what we do which is one of the conditions of that fund. We've had quite a few funds – one from the NHS healthy living fund – we'll apply for that again.

We've had funds from The Funding Network – an amazing organisation – we were chosen out of a batch of organisations. You have to appeal to people who want to give money to charity and they want to see how their money is going to be spent. We got over 5k from them. However you can't use any of this money to pay for utilities – they aren't funds for utilities. There are very few places that do funding for that so that's why you have to do your own fundraising ...

### **How is your organization dealing with the control of the State/Council and with the competition and exploitation exerted by the market?**

With the council it's a weird position we're in. The council have agreed we're supposedly going to get a lease. And with that lease we're also going to get a bulk of money that they ring-fenced when this place first closed. There is money that will allow us to get repairs done. We still have to pay the rent. When we get the lease the first thing we have to have is £2000 to pay the rent. So all the time we're selling the books Kathy and I are very aware that we have to get that £2000 along with probably another £800 a month that we have to find for utilities. There's a lot of money that has to be paid out on here. But when we get that bulk of money, when we get the lease, we can offset the repairs against the lease. But it's tight at the moment because we haven't got the lease and we are paying utilities although we're not paying the rent yet.

Apart from the fact that the council could deny us the lease they haven't got any power over us and what goes on in the building. They like to know what's going on in the building. We do have Lewisham Library services so they govern what goes on, just in as much as how we're still providing Lewisham library services. For example, we haven't got a computer that will do memberships at the moment. Those sorts of things there are huge restrictions on because that is part of a library service. But apart from that, no, we make the rules.

Regarding competition, there is only competition with other community libraries, about statistics – how many books can we issue and how many people can we get in. As far as the market goes there's a charity shop which sells books for a pound each but we sell them for 20p. We've got thousands and thousands of donated books ... so no, competition with the market isn't really a problem.

### **What are the aims of New Cross Learning?**

Well it's very much a growing project and always has been. When we made the constitution we decided it is definitely a place of learning, that can actually share skills and learning qualities of anything really – for all ages all cultures and all languages, so you know, it's more like a community hub. It is a place where people just know they can come. We have tried to make most of our activities totally free, the idea of charging doesn't appeal to us.

### **What do you feel you have achieved, and what are the problems you face?**

What I think we've done is we've proven this place to the council as a necessity. There are no other facilities in New Cross Road, and, it looks nice. This could have been a pound shop – what would that have done for the area really? We've stood the ground and here it is. From that lots of things can grow – like the exhibition at the moment [Black

History Month display]. It's always fantastic that something else happens here, that it's not just a library. Before we took it over it wasn't open as long hours as we are during the week, it didn't look as clean in here, it didn't have as many people working here – you couldn't expect a staff of three to do what goes on here now.

**Are there any past projects/models which have inspired you?**

The original model that we liked was the Pepys resource centre, which is a social enterprise under the direction of Darren Taylor of Eco Computers – he'd taken over the building at the Pepys resource centre on the Waterfront – a beautiful building. We kept going there because we loved it, we thought, 'we could have that in New Cross.' Now, in fact that's sort of dissolved over the past two years, they've just started it up again as a library down there, but I think that would have been the idea behind us taking a library over and working with volunteers which is what we've done.

**What are the hopes for the future?**

It is a growing project and it has to be a legacy for the future, with increasing input from local residents for what they want.

**What are the potentials New Cross has in order to increase the collectivization of resources like knowledge, housing, food, health care and so on?**

The mix of cultures and ethnicity is something so great about New Cross... I think what will happen in the future is that for all those things mentioned we will need to be a collective rather than being individual. I think it's going to lead to people bonding with each other out of necessity because they have to have certain needs met and if those needs aren't met they have to turn to somebody else for them and maybe in that, I see New Cross as leading the way, because of what a vibrant community we have here.

# ASSEMBLY

*“From our direct experience, we sit at the juncture between common resource for collective use over privatization and enclosure of land and resources. Our activities strive to increase collective access to resources, whilst at the same time operating from within privatised and enclosed land.”*

**What are the aims of the project you are involved in?**

Assembly's main aims are to form relationships with local people and the creative community and to harbour these collaborations to utilise the Old Tidemill School as a kind of physical creative commons. We understand the intrinsic value of a space that has unspecified use, one that can morph, change and evolve. We would ultimately like to retain the space in this way, to avert the commercial privatisation of this place. The garden on the land is invaluable as a green space in an otherwise dense and deprived urban area. The garden, playground and the school itself has the opportunity to become a test bed for social action, positive change and community ownership.

**What do you feel you have achieved, and what are the problems you face?**

Our achievements could be summarised like this: successfully securing funding for a number of projects from a number of government schemes; local engagement, forming relationships with the local community, organisations and groups; positive change, improved perceptions both of ourselves from the outside community and from ourselves to the local area; education, skill sharing within the local area, promoting social action and empowerment through positive change; motivation as a voluntary organisation, being able to balance paid work and voluntary work to still reach a level of autonomy and longevity.

Our problems could be summarised like this: ownership (our own situation and being able to give ownership to the wider community); communication, wider perceptions, lack of support and strength through partners; conflict in time, living and working in same space, actually making a living from the project.

**Are there any past projects/models which have inspired you?**

There are various projects and models that have inspired us, such as the projects of Department 21 ([department21.net/?page\\_id=1919](http://department21.net/?page_id=1919)), Open Sailing ([sites.google.com/a/open-sailing.net/www/contribute/syntax](http://sites.google.com/a/open-sailing.net/www/contribute/syntax)), The Invisible Committee. Our work has broadened, covering many models/methods: permaculture, arts collectives such as Griezdale Arts, enterprises such as Arcola Theatre etc.

**What is the form of organization of your collective, would you say it is a form of self-organization and how do you deal with formal and informal hierarchies?**

We find ourselves most aligned to a model of meritocratic adhocracy. Below is a diagrammatic thought about how this process might manifest itself. This model may change and adapt over time.

Our linear hierarchy allows us to all work from the same level, with equal responsibilities and inputs naturally across time. As projects pop-up and certain skills are needed for those projects, or if we collaborate with certain other groups, that person/group will lead their project and we will act as a support platform and network holding them up, should they need it and for the duration they need. This way of organising is completely adaptable on a project by project, day by day basis.

**Another important question is that of economical sustainability: how do you support the work financially and what impact does this have on your project?**

We support our project through publicly available and community organization grants. We have had continued support from charities, and picked up on local resources available. However up to this point the funding received has only been able to be used for materials, project development, etc. and



adhocracy equal /  
structureless hierarchy

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adhocracy developed.  
free form support struc-  
tures used to solve prob-  
lems develop projects.



hasn't been able to be used on payment for the persons organizing or running these activities. The majority of our work with the school space still remains volunteer based. We are looking into social enterprise models that could be taken on once certain funding has been attained. For example a social sports club that has been funded and equipment/resources have been purchased with the funding, can we now charge a small fee for use of the club to see its continued opening and even possibly pay someone to work at the club during its opening hours?

### **What is your relation with the local government and with market conditions like competition and exploitation?**

As our relationship to the space we inhabit is predominantly in the form of 'tenants' it would make sense to talk about our relationship with local government in these terms. Our formal title in this landlord/tenant relationship is that of 'guardians'. A word with connotations relating to custodians, stewards of the land. These are misconstrued titles for what is actually quite a precarious living choice. Our rights are less than that of a normal rental agreement between tenant and landlord. There are no deposit protection schemes to speak of or nationally recognised safeguards in place to protect the position of said tenant. As it is stipulated in the contract: "The Licensee and 'the company' agree that this agreement does not give exclusive possession to the guardian, nor does it create the relationship of landlord and tenant between him and 'the company'. The guardian shall not be entitled to an assured tenancy or statutory periodic tenancy under the provisions of the Housing Act 1988 or any other statutory security of tenure at any time."

We effectively deal with 'middle men', a property guardianship company who are given buildings from local councils to ensure protection and maintenance through occupation. The collective we now call 'Assembly', formed out of

this group of guardians. So although we operate from the space with an intention of commoning the site and want to open up a platform for creative exchanges to take place, we work beneath a tangle of hierarchical controls that we will probably never be able to infiltrate. We use a term from the philosopher Brian Holmes, 'the power of small agencies', to describe the capabilities of small grassroots movements with regards to wider state ownership and control. His frequent collaborator and wife Claire Pentecost, elaborates on this concept, describing a 'radical intimacy' in terms of the evolution of simple cells structure. Some theorists suggest, a cell nuclei was first formed by one simple cell ingesting another. This did not destroy the cell, but instead became host to its new inhabitant. The nuclei then became a force from within, creating a mindshift in the cell, altering its perceptions and choices. This, we believe, is the position we take within this hierarchy and on a macroscale, of grassroots movements in relation to the state.

**According to your experience, what are the potentials of Deptford/New Cross area in order to increase the collectivization of resources like knowledge, housing, food, health care and so on?**

From our direct experience, we sit at the juncture between common resource for collective use over privatization and enclosure of land and resources. Our activities strive to increase collective access to resources, whilst at the same time operating from within privatised and enclosed land. Our aspirations to live and work collectively are diametrically opposed to the evolving system of the enclosure of vacant and underused property. Sanford co-op, Londons oldest co-op housing is sited close by, its situation is very different from ours. Sanford had the teachings and guidance of John Hands, author of 'Housing Co-operatives' and founder of the housing co-operative movement. We have the precariousness of guardianship living, with the glimmer of hope that

being resourceful enough to form a Community Interest Company or other social enterprise may elevate us to the point of having the ability to seize privatised land through 'community asset transfers' and social investment. They are very different sets of tools to operate with a multitude of challenges to deal with in comparison to the 'traditional' squatting to gain ownership model.

As opposed to housing co-ops of the past, social enterprise's, community interest companies and the concept of the civic society are perhaps an evolution and formalisation of the tools of the past. Perhaps better equipped, and necessarily so, to face legislative changes and laws that actively encourage enclosure of the commons. The physical resources we have to offer include a school building, a concrete playground and a landscaped green space. The potential of these material resources are greatly increased when knowledge, innovation and creativity are shared through cooperation and collaboration. The same goes for any space in a state of change or in limbo, it takes the power of 'small agencies' to alter their path towards a true commons.

### **And finally we would like to ask you: what are your hopes for the future?**

Our pinnacle would be to take tenure of the school and land and retain the space for the wider community in the long term. Failing this, we believe we can at least save the garden as vital green space and common resource for the whole community. As Alan Kay said: "The best way to predict the future, is to invent it."

# POETRY GROUP

*“We organise on the horizontal – there are no leaders. We share our scribbled pamphlets and books, the sounds of words and our voices. The group started with three who put up posters about New Cross and hoped people would come. And they did and do. Some occasionally, some the once, and a body of us meet weekly in intimate conference. We developed in an organic way – sans a pre-plan other than, let us do poetry! Yerr.”*

Financially, we are independent from any State and Market system. And are glad. We share what we have with each other – our books, our poetry, our knowledge, our care for each other. We investigate different art movements – take our love of Dada and write our own – Che,che cheioo Woo Wawoo CHO chiiyiime me me me yimes.’

We meet at the New Cross People’s Library (now called New Cross Learning, but we hate that). The library was not permitted by the council to be called a library! After they shut it down in the first instance against people’s wishes. We are in a precarious position and at the mercy of Lewisham council who may pull the rug out from under us at any time. But the library has become a major resource for local people where we meet and hold events. The council might not dare! But if they did they would have one a hell of a fight. And I feel certain we’d win.

There is a great strength of community in New Cross and we feel very part of it. The New Cross Commoners have also sometimes met at the library, and two of our poetry group are members and all of us share an interest in local as well as wider politics and would like to reclaim spaces for the people. People over profit etc. Sainsbury’s carpark is a massive space unused for instance. And Goldsmiths is not using all the buildings it owns. Land to grow food and a space to share food would be desirable. Self sufficiency beyond the market. Free books free knowledge free beer.

The poetry group has been a terrific success. We all share an interest in literature, of course, and bring in our different books to read, so that we are constantly learning and being inspired. But it has gone way beyond just that. We are like a little family or something – there is a real caring for each other. People have their various problems and these are shared along with the books. We have had some wonderful

poets bring in their work to read for us from all over London. They love New Cross when they come! We hope to make our own publications soon, and that could inspire some art beyond the words. It would be good to learn some cheap methods of knocking up books/booklets – homemades that we don't need any kind of publisher for other than ourselves.

# CAHOOTS

*“The amount we each pay is below average market rates for the area, and will stay the same, even as market rates rise. As our loans are paid off in the future, our rents will go down (to almost nothing, eventually), making this a sustainable long term alternative to the profit driven housing market where house prices and rents are increasingly unaffordable and those on low incomes are forced far from the centre of the city, from workplaces, family and community, or into unsafe, precarious or overcrowded housing.”*

## **How is this project organised?**

We are a housing co-operative. In 2011 the landlord of our 14 bedroom house in New Cross decided he wanted to sell. The tenants living in the house at the time offered to buy it from him, collectively, to start a new housing co-operative; that is, a home for many, with no landlord, owned and run collectively by the people who live in it. Our aims are to provide safe, secure and affordable housing for queer and trans people and allies with specific recognition of queer/trans people of colour and queer/trans people with disabilities, and to work toward an anti-oppressive ethos in our home.

At the moment we are in-between two legal statuses — not quite a house of multiple occupancy and almost a housing co-operative. In a true housing co-operative no individual owns the house, no individual makes decisions about the house, and no individual profits from it. We have not yet bought the house, so we do still have a landlord, but we try to organise ourselves as if we do not. We make our decisions collectively, by consensus, which takes longer, but means that no-one is ever forced to live with a decision they disagree with. We share the workload of running the house amongst ourselves as equally as possible.

## **How do you support the work financially and what impact does this have on your project?**

To buy our house we are taking out a mortgage for the majority of the cost, and raising the rest in 'loan stock'. Loan stock is investment into the house, from individuals or organisations, over a fixed amount of time and at an interest rate determined by the investor (up to 4%). It allows us to borrow money at a better rate than we would be able to from a bank, and is a very safe, ethical and financially worthwhile investment opportunity for people looking to invest their money. In order to repay these loans, each member pays their monthly rent. The amount we each pay is below average

market rates for the area, and will stay the same, even as market rates rise. As our loans are paid off in the future, our rents will go down (to almost nothing, eventually), making this a sustainable long term alternative to the profit driven housing market where house prices and rents are increasingly unaffordable and those on low incomes are forced far from the centre of the city, from workplaces, family and community, or into unsafe, precarious or overcrowded housing. Our hope is for the project to create a safe, sustainable and affordable living situation that is immune to the effects of the market, with the aim of reducing living costs considerably for those who are part of the co-op now and in the future.

### **How is the organisation you are part of dealing with the control of the State / Council and with the competition and exploitation exerted by the market?**

Co-operative housing exists outside the rental and property market; if the value of our house in 10 years time is double what it is now, our rents will not be affected and the house cannot be sold for-profit – even if all 14 members voted to sell, once debts have been repaid any surplus has to go to another co-operative, though once housing is co-operatively owned, it tends to remain so.

Our home is truly a ‘commons’, neither privately/individually owned, nor publically/state owned, but owned and organised by those who use it. It has taken a long time and a lot of work to get to the point we are at now, both practically (legal, financial), and in terms of working as a group to find a system for communicating and making decisions that works for us in this situation.

### **What are the hopes for the future?**

The next big aim is to complete the sale of the house, which will happen as soon as possible, definitely within the next year. The change in legal status once we own the house will

bring some changes to our collective workload and how we are structured, so we need to negotiate that transition period. After the house is ours we have loads of plans, like building an accessible meeting house/resource centre at the end of our garden! Ultimately, we would like to see co-operative housing proliferate in New Cross, and want to use everything we have learnt during the process of setting up this co-operative to get more and more housing out of private, and into common ownership.

PLACES OF  
COMMON—  
ING

*IN NEW  
CROSS*

*Rustling plants, the sound of a train somewhere nearby, walking down a narrow path, working our way through grass and flowers that come almost to the height of our shoulders, intense shades of green everywhere. Stepping through the gate of the **New Cross Cutting** nature reserve means travelling miles away from London within two minutes time. Open only once a month, this little space along the railway tracks fuels our desire for more wild, green space in the city. Not well-managed lawns but carefully supported wilderness.*

*Black history month, language exchange, poetry club, Save Lewisham Hospital, Party in the Park, mystery walks, make some noise to save our NHS, entrance: the most lively window front on New Cross Road. Closed due to the cuts in May 2011, since July 2011 **New Cross Learning** is run by local activists of all ages. Making space for a wide range of probable and improbable activities, this library-of-sorts spurs our desire for more self-organised spaces from which social transformation can take place.*

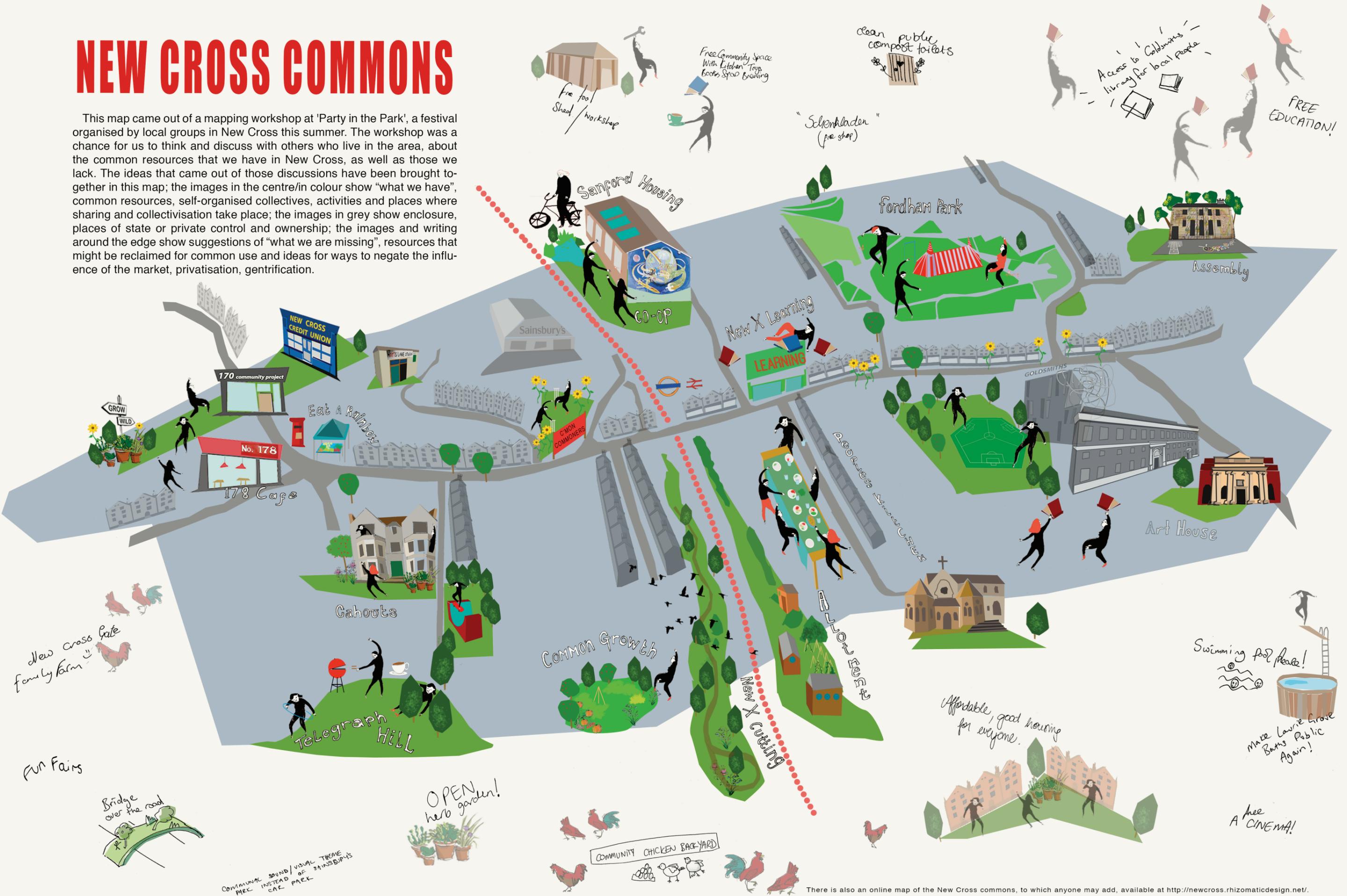
*Thatcher, Reagan and Heseltine: racing with evil smiles around the world on nuclear bombs. The giant blue mural tells us that this row of houses must have hosted rebellious ideas for a long time. In fact, since 1973, the inhabitants of the **Sanford Housing Co-op** have built a support structure for lives that don't want to conform to individualised, high-pressure lifestyles. Here decisions about housing are taken together by 120 inhabitants,*

*rents are kept low, while the houses and their surroundings are continually improved in terms of environmental soundness. Furthermore, conventions about compartmentalised living are partly broken down, for instance by keeping the back-gardens as one enormous piece of green in which to socialise, rather than opting for neatly compartmentalised prison-style backyards. This place lets us desire to also use our resources in ways that create enabling residues, that allow us to build structures which also people coming after can draw on when wanting to live lives that are not dictated by the need for ever more money.*

*From New Cross Gate to the Thames, this is the area of London where intense class struggles and intercultural encounters have a long history in the city. The shipyards that once were to be found around Deptford Creek were places of violence and exploitation, but also places of resistance, transgression and hope. They were the places where workers built up their own micro-economies around the waste produced by the shipbuilding industry: by appropriating (as well as strategically producing) wood-chips of all sizes that could be used for everything from building shelters to cooking, they sustained themselves beyond the meagre wages they were paid. But the shipyards were also the places where slaves would flee their ships, touch British ground, be free and contribute to the lives in the area. Being reminded of this **radical local history** of the area we live in, fuels our desire to contribute to it and to continue its line into the future.*

# NEW CROSS COMMONS

This map came out of a mapping workshop at 'Party in the Park', a festival organised by local groups in New Cross this summer. The workshop was a chance for us to think and discuss with others who live in the area, about the common resources that we have in New Cross, as well as those we lack. The ideas that came out of those discussions have been brought together in this map; the images in the centre/in colour show "what we have", common resources, self-organised collectives, activities and places where sharing and collectivisation take place; the images in grey show enclosure, places of state or private control and ownership; the images and writing around the edge show suggestions of "what we are missing", resources that might be reclaimed for common use and ideas for ways to negate the influence of the market, privatisation, gentrification.



**This map was produced with the information gathered during a mapping workshop at Party in the Park, a festival organized by local groups and associations in New Cross in September 2013. Together with the local community we were thinking about:**

### **What we have in New Cross**

*resources to share, self-organized collectives*

### **What we are missing in New Cross**

*resources to reclaim and to be organized collectively*

A massive communal sound - visual trip theme park instead of Sainsbury's park // A swimming pool where Laurie Grove Bath is now, the building is owned by Goldsmiths but it used to be a public bath and it should become public again. // A bath house – skip pool – saunas – hot tub – recycled wood // A 24 hour craft – art – workshop space // Run New Cross as a collective commune // A New Cross family farm // A community chicken backyard to get eggs // Clean public compost toilets // A bridge over the main road with a garden on the top // Tobacco growing // Schenkladen – free shop // Protection on rent – rent cap – good housing for everyone // Free education // A place for cultural encounters and exchanges // A free community space with kitchen, toys, books, sofas and a brewing set // Cheap good beer // Cooperative cafes // A free cinema // Fun fairs // Bauwagens // A community tool shared workshop // Access to Goldsmiths library for local people // Commitment based work sharing // Open herb garden allotment useful plants for medicine culinary - Container growing – Recycling, make it yourself ...

### **[newcross.rhizomaticdesign.net](http://newcross.rhizomaticdesign.net)**

We have also made a digital map of commoning in New Cross, using the material gathered in the mapping workshop. Everyone can add new material to the map to indicate resources to be shared, resources to be reclaimed and self-organized activities in New Cross.

SELF—  
ORGAN—  
ISED  
LEARNING

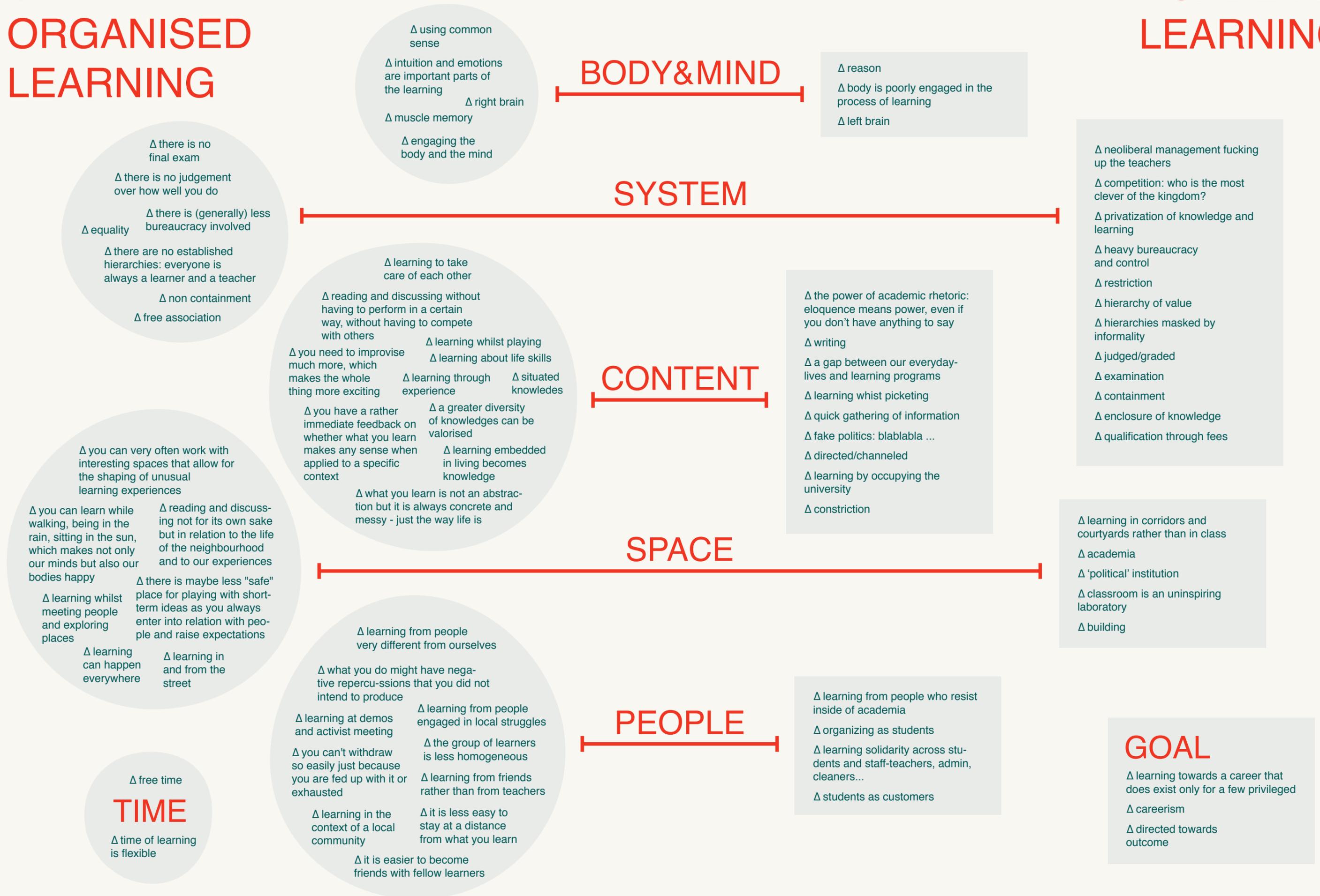
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ACADEMIC  
LEARNING

The way knowledge is constructed and valorised today is largely defined by institutions where learning is organized hierarchically and according to the rules of the market. The New Cross Commoners was partly formed in response to of a frustration with academic knowledge production, often self-referential and detached from the life and issues of people living in London and New Cross. Many of us had or are having experience of learning in academia: with this mind-map we attempt to trace some of the differences between learning in academic institutions and a self-organized learning not only from texts but also from the life of a neighborhood.

# SELF— ORGANISED LEARNING

# ACADEMIC LEARNING



# NEW X COMMONS *GLOSSARY*

This glossary includes some of the recurring terms we have used in our collective inhabitation of New Cross. Each term has different entries, responding to different understandings, sensibilities and specifications, in some cases contrasting ones. This glossary does not seek the fixation of meaning in the vocabulary we use, but rather begins to articulate our wishes and desires concerning what a word can come to mean, how a word can come to be used, how a word can affect our practice.

## **Circulation of the Commons**

- I) *Keeping in motion what we share openly.*
- II) *The need for different experiences of commoning to relate and sustain each other, also beyond local contexts.*
- III) *Commons are all about the connections. When they begin to close off they easily become isolated, sterile and exhaust the people involved.*

## **Commoning**

- I) *The activities through which a common is constituted and maintained, through which a resource, material and/or immaterial, comes to be used and organized collectively. These activities imply conflicts, negotiations and care. The conflicts are both antagonistic towards the market and privatization and towards the control of the State. On a different level conflicts and care take place amongst the different people using the resource.*
- II) *Sharing a certain knowledge, thing or skill with people openly and with pleasure: Suzy thinks that commoning is not a concept but an embodied activity that needs time, space and care.*
- III) *Any act through which you remove yourself (mentally, financially, socially) from the grips of State control and Market control.*

## **De-proletarianisation**

- I) *Process that allows us to free ourselves from the slavery of the wage labour by learning how to do things together for ourselves, how to live together collectively, how to self-organise our lives.*
- II) *It is about gaining the knowledges and skills for going about our lives without constantly needing to rely on the market. In this sense, it is about taking back knowledges that we have exteriorised, but also about finding out what new knowledges and skills we need for our contemporary lives.*

## **Desire**

*I) A force that transforms how things are. For example, a desire for transversality brings together different kinds of people without erasing their differences, constituting non-homogeneous communities.*

## **Enclosure**

*I) Originally a term used to signify the process of land enclosure that preceded the industrial revolution.*

*II) Enclosures are not just land enclosures, they are privatizations of all kinds of resources. For example Goldsmiths is enclosing knowledge by making students pay (very expensive) fees.*

*III) We can talk about enclosures also in relation to subjectivity, when what constitutes ourselves (skills, inclinations, desires) gets privatized, that is, exploited and sold for the profit of the market, instead of being put in common. We can speak of the enclosed subjectivities of capitalism.*

*IV) Public spaces without benches are a form of urban enclosure.*

## **Engagement**

*I) Being an active part of the story.*

*II) Political engagement refers to taking part in processes of social and political transformation, no matter the scale of this engagement.*

*III) To be involved in activities and to allow yourself to be changed by them.*

## **Mapping**

*I) The fact that any map as a representation of space is open to reconfiguration, intervention, contestation.*

*II) Through a collective mapping you can analyze and make visible power structures and dynamics taking place in a specific territory, but also, starting from the discussions the mapping involves and the material manipulation it triggers, you can create possibilities to transform a territory.*

## **Resources**

- I) They can be material (e.g. water) or immaterial (e.g. knowledge); they are what allows us to reproduce our livelihood.*
- II) Resources are vital for our lives. It is good to experience that many immaterial, but also material resources, can be shared without actually making our lives worse (as we are constantly made to fear).*

## **Rurban**

- I) It is a concept of injecting the rural logic of living into the urban environment in order to support the exchange of local knowledge, resources and aesthetics.*
- II) To conceive and practice the rural not as opposed or external to the urban.*
- III) It is about acknowledging that much of the rural lifestyles are today becoming ever more similar to those in urban settings.*
- IV) A conceptual tools to struggle against the commodification of life by reclaiming rural modes of doing and being against capitalist ways of life.*

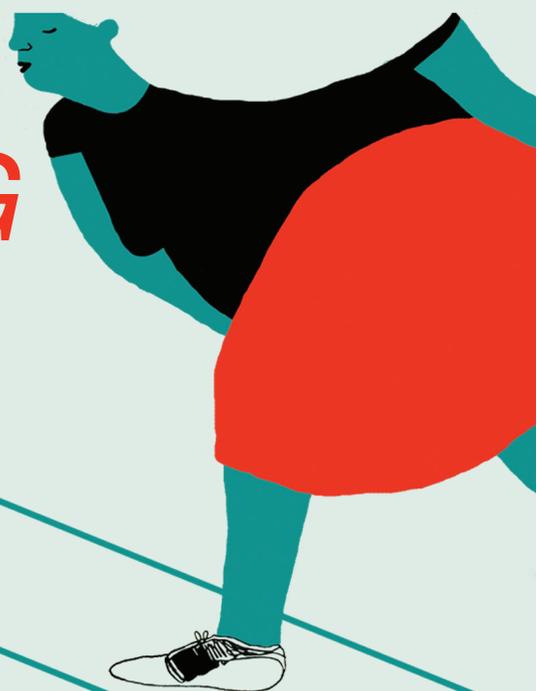
## **Sharing**

- I) An activity that makes you happy if it encounters some kind of reciprocity.*
- II) The act of exchanging resources without necessarily expecting anything in return.*
- III) A collective way of relating to objects and ideas that seeks to remove itself from the logics of appropriation, theft, colonisation, profit making.*

## **Sustainability**

- I) Social, economical, ecological, affective factors that have an impact in the continuation of any collective process.*
- II) When you embark on a collective project like the New Cross Commoners sustainability means to make sure to function according to the energies available without burning out.*

WORK —  
SHOPS:  
— *POWER*  
*SHUFFLE!*  
— *HAVING/*  
*NOT*  
*HAVING*



We borrowed these workshops from Jane Quin, a commoner from South Africa we met at a *Free Education Network gathering* which gave us a lot of enthusiasm and encouragement to set up the New Cross Commoners.

— The *POWER SHUFFLE* exercise was found as free source material on the web by a colleague of Jane in South Africa with whom Jane taught on various *Social Justice Education* courses for teachers. The version Jane used in London was mostly a new set of questions adapted to purpose and context. This version was adapted for a New Cross Commoners session that took place at the New Cross Cutting.

— The *HAVING AND NOT HAVING* activity was developed by Jane for a course called *Social Identities and Oppression in Education and Development*. Jane was looking for a way to facilitate reflection to develop awareness around the coincidence between personal motivation and experience with political positioning. This second activity was also re-adapted for the commoners to think of collectivization of resources in New Cross. We publish this material here so that you could make use of it and re-adapt it in turn.

# POWER AND RESOURCES SHUFFLE QUESTIONS

**If power and inequality are maintained through the access to resources ... what is power and what is privilege in our lives? Where does it come from? How is it maintained? ... and challenged? by whom?**

Power Shuffle is an activity to help consider these questions

## **Process Instructions**

Step backwards (1<) or forwards (1>), according to the instruction

Take note of how you feel as you respond, as well as noting the movement of others

It just helps us to reflect on what actual/potential power we do/ don't have ... to ... within ... with ...

## **Power shuffle list of STEPS**

Take 1> if you are fluent in English; if English is your home language

Take 2> if you are a British citizen

Take 1> if you are an EU citizen

Take 1< if you do not have permanent residence rights in UK/EU

Take 1> if you have a full-time job

Take 1/2> if you have a part-time job

Take 1< if you do not have a part-time or full-time job

Take 1> if your parents (can) help you with money; if you have a place 'to go back to' if everything fails

Take 2> if you would be able to provide for your basic needs if you lost your job (ok but for how long?)

Take 1S< if you are a primary supporter of one or more dependants

Take 1> if you own your own home; have your own car; are White; are Male; are under 65; are over 30; have a stable support network in London

Take 1/2> if you have a stable support network somewhere else

Take 1> if you have friends of different ages

Take 1> if you have a large kitchen; if you have a large garden; if you have an extra bed or sofa to host people at your place

Take 1> if you have positive experiences of collective action; if you have access to like-minded communities of praxis; if you believe in the possibility of social transformation; if you believe in effect from your own critical agency

Take 1> if you are good at growing vegetables; repairing toasters, sinks, computers, bikes and so on; building huts (in the wood); telling stories – with words or images; playing an instrument; cooking; healing people in some way; listening; cycling; sawing and mending.

# HAVING AND NOT HAVING (NEEDS AND DESIRES)

**Think what it is like to have...and not to have.**

## **Process Instructions**

Think of something that you have/have a lot of ... that makes your life better/more comfortable/safer/easier ... that only some others generally also have – it can be something material or immaterial, a resource or a skill.

Take a few minutes to DRAW it! it doesn't have to be a representational drawing, it can be just a symbol, something visual and concrete.

- Δ How do others see you because you have it?
- Δ How do you see yourself because you have it?
- Δ How does it make you feel to have it? ... slightly superior? Slightly guilty?
- Δ How does having it advantage you in other ways/ areas of your life?
- Δ How do you feel about sharing it?

Now try the opposite ...

Think of something you don't have and would like to have – something like a skill or resource that other people could share with you

- Δ How do you see yourself because you don't have it?
- Δ How does it make you feel not to have it? ... slightly less? Angry? Ashamed? Disadvantaged? ... freer?
- Δ Do you feel like it's okay for you to have less than someone else, that you sort of expect to and/or deserve to?
- Δ How does not having it disadvantage you in other ways/areas of your life?
- Δ How would you feel about getting an equal/more than equal share? What would you do/give up to get it?
- Δ How would you feel about somebody giving it to you? With or without strings attached? How would you be towards them?

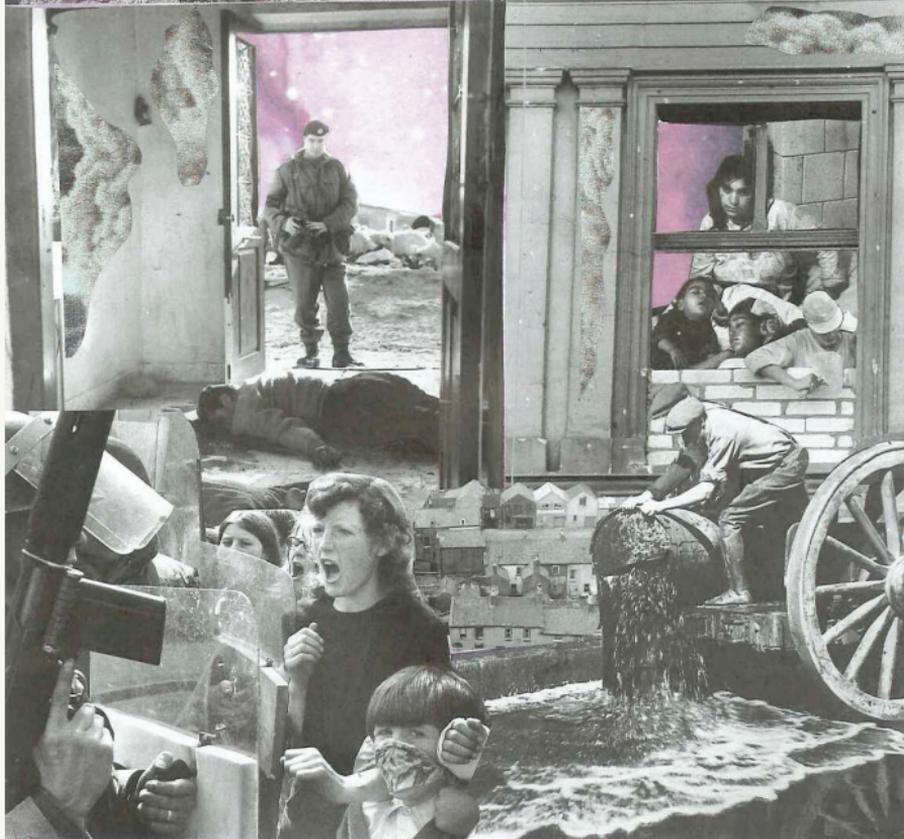
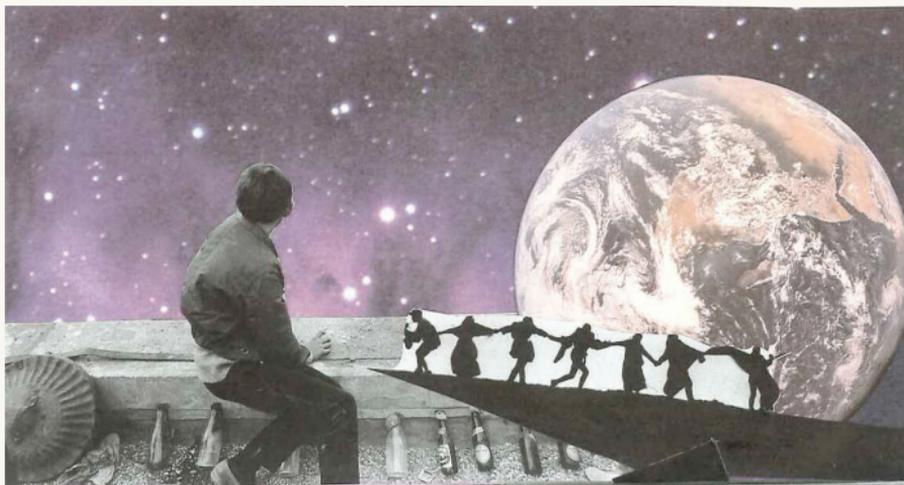
## **Discussion**

What do we do with our needs and desires?

Have a round to introduce the drawings done - what we have and what we don't.

Group or match different people's needs and desires whilst they present their drawings.

Questions? What comes out of this? Ideas for future activities?



## INTELLIGENT LIFE 2

Is your intellect subsidised and who are the  
consequences

who are uncritical      who are disastrous  
consequences of a system

I don't think I can be sustained      I am      sur  
plus      are you      sur      plus  
are you      sus      ten      ance

I don't know what you are talking about      there  
no such thing as a  
Fire station

Hos      pi      tal      is that were there are  
gathering

Hand me a sharp critique      no make that a hammer  
Are you lying to our fa      ces      is your very bi  
house sub      si      dised

Is my little room surplus      I had some things in  
there and people stayed  
I have since lost all of the things      and the  
people were      sur      plus



snort

gnic gnic

bleah

tsk tsk

anf

slurp

# C'MON COMMONERS!

JOIN US TO EXPLORE COMMONS AND COMMONING IN NEW CROSS

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New Cross Commoners is an open group of people learning from the neighbourhood and from each other ways of collectivising skills and resources. How do we sustain our lives together in these difficult times? How can we live, eat, care and learn together against the privatization of the market and the hierarchies of the State? How can we do so across the individual, the family, class and race, and in such a way as to respect and enjoy our diversities? Join us and we'll find this out together!

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[NEWXCOMMONERS.WORDPRESS.COM](http://NEWXCOMMONERS.WORDPRESS.COM)