

## Transcript of *Frontiers of Commoning*, Podcast #35

### Interview with Binna Choi Director of Casco Art Institute: Working for the Commons February 1, 2023

**Binna Choi:**[00:00:00] The relationship we have at Casco Art Institute with artists is like a form of kinship; you're moving in this web of relationship. And so what we have to focus more on is how to better take care of that relationship. If we imagine that we're working on the practice of relationship rather than the making of a good product, the world would become far better.

Announcer: This is *Frontiers of Commoning* with David Bollier.

**David Bollier:** My guest today is Binna Choi director of the Casco Art Institute whose tagline is 'Working for the Commons'. It's based in Utrecht, Netherlands.

Binna is a curator of artistic work for major exhibitions, and as a native of South Korea has been active in many international arts and cultural organizations, especially in Europe and Asia.

At Casco Institute, Choi has brought the ethic and practices of commoning to the administration [00:01:00] of an independent art center. Over the past fifteen years, she and her colleagues have pioneered new types of commons-inspired ways to mount exhibitions, work with artists, and engage with the local community and history.

As Choi puts it, it's all about exploring the commons as an alternative to binary worldviews and systems. It's about making commoning itself an organizing principle for art and art-making. Choi has served as curator, or artistic director, for the Singapore Biennale 2022, the Gwanju Biennale 2016, and the upcoming Hawai'i Triennial 2025.

She's been a faculty member of the Dutch Art Institute and an advisor for a field international network for cultural changemakers. Today we're going to learn about the spirit of commoning and how it's changing artistic practices, the curation of exhibitions, and our very perceptions of what art is.

Welcome, Binna.

**Choi:** Thank you for inviting me, David.

**Bollier:** I'm really curious to learn how an art center came to the commons; how you [00:02:00] decided that you would call yourself 'Working for the Commons' and what exactly that means or what you wanted it to mean.

**Choi:** So, the notion of commons was not new when we adopted this name ‘Working for the Commons’ in 2018. So since 2013 we had an artistic research program called ‘Composing the Commons’ and that program went until 2016. And then we had many, what we call ‘commission,’ meaning that we invite different artists as almost like a researcher to take on their own investigations of what the commons means to them. And then based on that they produce a new artwork. So we organized a few different kind of collective research groups, mostly locally-based.

**Bollier:** So you're really exploring the intersection of the commons and art, how art can contribute to the commons and how commoning might manifest in art. Give me some examples of how that's playing out. [00:03:00]

**Choi:** Well, there's an abundance of examples. Somehow, at this point of time, I tend to think every art can be the commons. When it's taken as a basic form of believing, without which you cannot actually lead a meaningful, joyful life. So it can be in any form, any language, any style, but I think there's a reason why artwork or art of the commons are limited. That's mostly around, I think, institutions and infrastructure, and how they are shared.

**Bollier:** In other words, you see that artistic practice itself is naturally part of the commons, but there's something to be engineered or orchestrated for an institution to run itself as a commons.

**Choi:** Yes, an institution also has some kind of rule, collective rule that governs our thought and our way of being. So since the late 19th century we started going to [00:04:00] museums. We, as a citizen and as a public. And that's where we find art...or like a private salon, where a few privileged people enjoy art, but in fact, we here...I'm speaking very much with a European-centered notion of art. One prominent way that art exists as commons is it exists in a community as a way to support ritual, as a way to support gathering of community, how they greet each other, how they relate to each other, how they celebrate and mourn each other, and so on.

**Bollier:** So in some ways it's taking art out of the institutions, the museums, and bringing it as part of a living culture of people. Is that a fair way to talk about it?

Choi: Yeah, that's great. Yeah.

Bollier: I remember reading on your webpage about one exhibit in particular in which you were trying to show how art was related to the community. It was called ‘Traveling Museum of Forgotten Skills.’ Why don't you tell me a little bit about that [00:05:00] exhibition and what it was hoping to achieve?

**Choi:** It's ‘Traveling Farm Museum of Forgotten Skills.’ There were two key aspects in that project: one was the forgotten agro-history of our cities; the other one was how this forgotten history or legacy is dealt with. We noticed there was a farmhouse standing alone surrounded by shopping center in the new neighborhood. So it hosts like around 80,000 people now. So it's more than a neighborhood, it's more like several neighborhoods.

So there are small towns that are next to the city of Utrecht. And these towns were all doing dairy, agriculture or other, greenhouse farming, but they were all washed out to be made into a new colony for human beings who commute to cities to work inside buildings [00:06:00] without soil and land. And this farmhouse, in fact, remained there without being inhabited or used for over ten years due to a dispute between the original owner, who's a farmer, and the city council who purchased the surrounding area. So we started by approaching the farmer.

We noticed the existence of this farmhouse. The owner refused selling his or her, their own house while there's a whole expanding urban development in the surrounding area. So we started by approaching the farmer-owner and learning about the story of the family who had lived there and who farmed over three generations. And then we got a key to use that farmhouse for certain periods of time, because he himself didn't know when [00:07:00] conflict would be over and then what he would do. So that's the beginning of the story of the Traveling Farm Museum of Forgotten Skills. That was really for us a great example of commoning with art.

**Bollier:** Essentially, it's like a living, co-participation, you were using this old farmhouse to try to bring alive the history of the location before the suburbs and development had changed its entire character

**Choi:** And then cohabiting in a space together and 're-arriving' and relating to the land through history, but also through actual physical engagement, farming, foraging, et cetera. But that lasted only ten months.

**Bollier:** And the public was invited to witness and participate in this?

**Choi:** Yeah. But occasions for larger public were just a few exhibitions or events, but in between them there were a lot of [00:08:00] different workshops for children and neighbors. Altogether, around ten members acted like kind of caretakers who really resided in that house.

Beginning of the traveling farm museum was with this farmhouse, which we occupied for over a year, which was becoming a kind of communal, neighborhood house, where we connected heritage and ecology as a kind of guiding principle. But then after a year of use of commoning that house, the farmer won the case from the city, meaning that he actually could do whatever he wanted to do with the house, and he immediately sold it because it didn't have a use for him as he's still farming somewhere on a smaller scale.

So he sold it off, and we had no time for organizing a fundraiser to [00:09:00] really make that house as our commons. So we had a time for reflecting, a time when we were reanimating that farmhouse and moving into a traveling farmhouse. So we named it as a Traveling Farmhouse of Forgotten Skills, in which we started focusing on connecting with different farming initiatives in the neighborhood.

**Bollier:** Tell me about some other commons initiatives, whether exhibitions or participatory projects that you launched. I think of, for example, the Composing the Commons thematic program, or the Site for Unlearning art organization.

**Choi:** *Traveling Farm Museum of Forgotten Skills* became the official name of that project and we started traveling to meet different farmers around the city.

And so we got to know about ten different farming organizations, initiatives or families in the surrounding area. [00:10:00] So we organized tours and workshoping with them on the site. The farm became the main activities of this museum and some kind of detritus and tools from this farming initiative started making our collection of the museum, and we also started asking artists to develop some works that relate to this farm site.

It's kind of aiming at different kind of museum, not standing in the middle of city, open to the large public to come in to contemplate artworks, but it's rather bringing people to the field to experience what's growing, how things are growing, et cetera.

**Bollier:** In some ways, putting a different frame around real life and making that the art, by doing it in the field.

**Choi:** Yeah, yeah. Right away, I kept on saying we, and so we are the team at Casco and the [00:11:00] outsiders, transdisciplinary art collective.... They are made up of art educator, artist, chef, architect.

**Bollier:** So they collaborate on these projects from their different disciplines.

**Choi:** Yes, and also by actually living in that neighborhood.

**Bollier:** So is Casco Art Institute then primarily for those artist practitioners from the different disciplines? How does it try to engage with, say, the community itself or the general public?

**Choi:** In the beginning when I started working, I worked with the idea of research and selection based on quality and necessity. But as we continued our practice, one artist would bring another artist, and not only artists...activists, researchers. They all bring one another and so it created a web of relationships that gives us a reason to exist and also gives us some resilience [00:12:00] to survive.

**Bollier:** And does the same team work together on all projects or do different players come together depending upon the particular project?

**Choi:** They're definitely projects where we all need to work together, with emphasis on working for the commons as a guiding principle for the organization. Each one has their own project, which we initially called 'study lines.' So that's one of the core kind of leverage or even a method for us to undo hierarchy and question concentration of power. We are a small team, from six to eight, everyone was encouraged to have their own, what we call study lines, subject they can commit to as it concerns their own life, and second condition for their study line is that this subject has community or even a kind of movement around it, so it's not your private and individual pursuit. So [00:13:00] these study lines become the basis for developing a project.

**Bollier:** So really you're kind of a collective developing different artistic practices that are diverse among yourselves that are trying to engage with the community, with the commons ethic as the guiding principle. Is that a fair way to put it?

Choi: Yes.

Bollier: I mean, I like how on your website you describe how...let me just read this:

*Art is an imaginative way of doing and being, which connect heals, opens, and moves people into the new social visions. Art is, in fact, inherent to the commons as they are shared resources to keep the culture of community alive. In turn, the commons may well sustain art. With art and the commons we can draw a worldview beyond the divides of public and private to shape together a new paradigm of living together as we desire, be it decolonial, post-capitalist, matriarchal, solidarity economies, we name it.*

I thought that was a nice summary of what you are attempting to do.

**Choi:** Yes, it's [00:14:00] written very well, some really brilliant editorial help from Caroline Woolard, an artist who's actually working for Open Collective.

**Bollier:** Let's talk about that. I could imagine unlike more familiar art institutions, which get money from big donors or even corporations, how do you sustain a vision of the commons at the Art Institute, which is not the typical way for an art institution to run itself? What are the finances and governance like?

**Choi:** So, Casco has been funded by city council, mostly by national art funding Core Mondrian Fund, and occasionally by European funding and there's another force, very odd, but important funding, which is private-public funding called DOEN Foundation, whose resource comes from the lottery in the Netherlands.

**Bollier:** So that gives you, I assume, a certain stability of funding as opposed to having to chase [00:15:00] foundation grants or rich people for donations

**Choi:** Yeah. Whenever I hear about rich people, I feel like we should forget about this notion of rich people and poor people. Also this division. Someone just has more money, but not other things and others have less money, but have other things. Yes, definitely giving us more stability and room for experimentation and also having this rhythm of downtime and upper time. But that good era has been challenged quite a lot with 'Working for the Commons.'

Actually, with this 'Working for the Commons' trajectory, financially we have been destabilized because we got slower and this kind of decentralization and then changing culture within the context of Western Europe [00:16:00] or in the Netherlands, I think has a cost.

**Bollier:** So do you think that it's sustainable over the long term? Is this because the funding sources that you mentioned have decided they have other priorities than the commons?

**Choi:** Foundations, like DOEN Foundation, they are getting closer and closer to commoning practice, but the amount of money and their role in the field of art isn't as big as other funding so far. This kind of foundation is very helpful, but we still need to explore other funding resources outside of the field of art. Meanwhile, not losing contact with the core institutions of art, like national funding, to find terms in which we understand and support each other. And this relationship has been up and down. Yeah, and the other one is also kind of working on changing the funding [00:17:00] structure, a way of asking and then distributing the fund.

**Bollier:** It strikes me that not having as large a budget as major institutions, you have more freedom to do the kind of artistic projects you want, but of course, you also have certain limitations because you have to meet basic needs. And I could imagine you are also liberated from having to polish your reputations.

So many large institutions are so concerned about their reputations that they don't take risks, they don't experiment. It's all about good press. Whereas if you're simply courageous and doing your work as an artist, you often come up with some really interesting things.

**Choi:** My colleague, Marianna Takou, she's known for saying that 'I'm very cynical, but I'm hopeful.'

So I think we are very cynical, or we keep looking at the non-bright side of the world and how hard it is to reverse course, facing the collapse or [00:18:00] deadlocks in many different places. But I guess when she says 'hopeful,' it's a kind of honest practice that keeps us doing what we think is right, let's say, that makes us keep commoning.

**Bollier:** It seems that this is a larger trend that I've seen in a number of experiments or projects. There's...we can talk about the Arts Collaboratory Project, which is a number of arts organizations sharing budgets and governance. We can talk about the Documenta 15 exhibition in Kassel, Germany, which occurred this past summer 2022, which was about an Indonesian artist collective Ruangrupa, collaborating with dozens of different artists to put on a major international exhibition.

I know of other people I've interviewed for this podcast, Double Edge Theater in Massachusetts, which runs itself much as a commons or the Furtherfield collective in London, which is very much into [00:19:00] digital autonomous organizations in the technical field. Tell me what you make of these trends and how you think you participate in those trends. Or is this a larger trend?

**Choi:** That just makes me think of the great resignation trend. Like Furtherfield, Arts Collaboratory, Documenta. I think our commonality is that we are using art, but our primary interest in the language familiar to us is on how to live together, resisting current institutional oppression or violence. That's how you can navigate all the precarity and instability instead of going into a museum, which may give you good salary, or a pension, and so on. Not to say that you can't do anything with a museum, life becomes really a [00:20:00] major site for practice, all the other art and culture things, divided into different disciplines, come into play or are deployed.

Yeah, a philosopher like Peter Osborne once was saying that this kind of place, like project space has a challenge in terms of their legibility. Because there is so much fusing of art and life or cartoon life, life, art, and social movement. It's hard to identify or categorize. That's where we are. The fact that Documenta came to be a platform for such a practice is actually remarkable and indicates the necessity of these kinds of needs and practices.

**Bollier:** I think it's interesting how you had told me earlier that there's been a conservative backlash to the Institute, and I was curious about people's feelings about the different art approach that that Costco has [00:21:00] pioneered. How do they respond either favorably or with attacks?

**Choi:** Well, the public and private regime has been existing and operative over like several centuries, so it's really hard to give value to the commons. So there is always this question about the visibility and legibility. This is really crazy.

**Bollier:** You mean making your projects more visible to the general public?

**Choi:** So I also like really focus on, in like Singapore Biennial, works that are not about what you see, but actually what you're in touch with. Or what you see is kind of problematic, so it's not shining or bright or impressive, so you have to doubt what it [00:22:00] is, and then you get to think further and then get in touch with life behind that work.

So our ongoing challenge is about visibility with the larger public. That's one of the critiques that comes from major institutions for funding. But who are the general public? Being together by the commons requires a delicate balance where you need to take care of your own common resources. Why taking care of your relationship as a basis of the resource. So this productivity approach, actually it can be far more effective when there is benevolent dictator if such a thing can exist.

**Bollier:** You're raising a very good point to the extent that public institutions want outcomes and results. Capitalist economy wants productivity, but commoning is more about the ongoing relationships, which over time yield results, but it's not [00:23:00] as, let's just say, productive or the outcomes are not as predictable in an industrial fashion.

So, I guess you're trying to bend some of the ideas of what an art institution is all about and what art is all about.

**Choi:** Yeah. It comes down to qualitative relationship. How to care and maintain the relationship between each other, between yourself and environment, between your present and the past?

**Bollier:** Well, let's talk about the Institute's relationships with artists, because that strikes me as a deep theme.

You provide space often to artists in the institute. You have artists, tenants meetings at which you discuss how things are going and the relationships, and you help to foster their work. So

you're working with artists rather than simply commissioning or outsourcing some work. Tell me a little bit about how you've evolved those relationships.

**Choi:** So relationship with artists tend to become quite long, and [00:24:00] so it forges some kind of friendship. Actually, that's something that could address when we talk about this phenomenon of the commons, including Documenta. However public it becomes it can still invite certain jealousy. There is such a suspicion of nepotism and navel-gazing introversion.

If we imagine that we work on practice of relationship rather than making good product, the world would become far better. The relationship we have at Casco Art Institute with artists is like a form of kinship. There would be a couple who bear offspring, and they come and grow and become part of family.

You're moving in this web of relationship. And so what we have to focus more on is how to take care of that relationship better. What are the kinds of ways to take care of the relationship?

**Bollier:** Do people sometimes accuse Casco? 'This is not good art.' You know, [00:25:00] 'Are you too focused on the relationships? How can you be producing good art?'

What would be your response to something like that?

**Choi:** There are many other institutions who are showing good art, so.... But if there is another institution that may not be showing good art, but art with the domains, or fear that are not considered art, [they are] kind of exemplifying what that relationship could be.

**Bollier:** You've talked about the need for art institutions to undergo a practice of unlearning. What do they need to unlearn?

**Choi:** We started with being busy in the sense of anxiety and frustration coming with this being busy. It's a core initiative practice instigated by the artist Annette Krauss, who has over a twenty-year-long relationship with Casco. The emphasis that she brought up was that we have to be aware of our habits [00:26:00] of knowledge or learning, which seem to be unrecognized and unconscious while it's active and operating just like a habit and then the possibility of unlearning or undoing that. What we as a team, together with Annette wanted to unlearn is being busy and being a productivist. And in place of that we wanted to pursue what we call 'deep understanding,' which became, you know, what we call a 'study.'

**Bollier:** You could say that you can't get too much more avant-garde than that in terms of having understanding being what you're trying to focus on versus some expensive piece of art that somebody can make a lot of money off of.

**Choi:** Yea, so, I mean, it can even go too far. We have to think more about how we are living in a time where we don't need to produce any longer, to engage with what's already there, and repair what has been [00:27:00] put wrong.



**Bollier:** So in some ways it's about pioneering a different worldview and perspective. Because when I think of the Casco Institute's work, I think of words like 'participatory,' 'non-hierarchical,' 'placemaking,' 'feminist,' certainly, and then 'artist-centered,' and of course 'commoning.' And it seems that you're trying to create an a type of institution that can hold those types of activities. But we don't really have institutions like that yet. So it seems that maybe Casco itself is a big experiment.

**Choi:** Great. Yeah. Thank you, David.

What we do best is defined by the space and place. And then duration. Duration, of course, you can see in space, which becomes a kind of place. But the other challenge that we have in relation to that, and it's an interesting challenge is that maybe some mainstream view cannot [00:28:00] really understand or couldn't understand before, like, 'Oh they're very locally committed,' but it's super international, it's even international. Not only working with other European countries or America, but like Colombia, Brazil, Kijistan Indonesia, Senegal, Mali, and so on.

**Bollier:** What are your relationships with artists in those countries?

**Choi:** Networks like Arts Collaboratory, so regular meetings, and these regular meetings are for learning from each other, but also co-conceiving structure of economy for practice.

Through this we got to learn more about the field of philanthropy and donors, engaging with them to explore different ways that we are using resources and sharing the resources, financial and non-financial.

**Bollier:** We've mentioned the Arts Collaboratory a [00:29:00] few times. Maybe you could describe what the Arts Collaboratory is all about and how it's a different kind of arts institution.

**Choi:** So Ruangrupa, Casco, they are all part of Arts Collaboratory, which is around a twenty-five member organization, mostly in the area labeled as a global south. It started as a funding structure initiated by two funders in the Netherlands: DOEN Foundation, and the other one is Hivos which is actually a development aid fund, but now the major remaining funder is the DOEN Foundation.

When they started, they had a desire to make it as a platform for exchange and relationship building to enhance that aim Casco was invited to be facilitator, so we started organizing annual assemblies since then to challenge the funding structure. So [00:30:00] no more application, no more report, no more planning for project.

**Bollier:** So in some ways meant to be a new way to empower the various organizations while allowing them to co-learn from each other as fellow artists.

**Choi:** Yeah, so it went in parallel to our Site for Unlearning with the whole team and Annette Krauss. So learning from each other and having deeper understanding about life and any other things became the core and that doesn't mean that we stop producing, we stop making

project. So we realized the funding economy is very extractive, and it's an easy way to keep all the capitalist agenda, excelling with a good product and individual brilliance and accumulate the fame individually and so on.

**Bollier:** Binna, I want to thank you for sharing your story about the evolution of Casco, and I want to thank you for pioneering [00:31:00] this kind of commoning work in the arts context. I think, very much needed, and fortunately there's a lot of it going on these days. Thank you for joining me.

**Choi:** Thank you for inviting me.