



Day 1, photo by Yunyoo Kwak

How a conference devoted to Giorgio Agamben's thinking of a Franciscan way of life creates its own sense of collectivity.

It was beautiful spring weather for the first event at Casco - Office for Art, Design and Theory's new space, which, very appropriately, used to be a convent. The reading group [*Use and Form-of-Life*](#), organised by Casco, in collaboration with Museum of Arte Útil at Van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven, involved a critical and artistic exploration of Giorgio Agamben's latest addition to his Homo Sacer-project, *The Highest Poverty: Monastic Rules and Forms-of-Life*, the English translation of which was published just last year, as a prologue to Casco's inaugural exhibition and large scale project *New Habits* which opens in the new space on the 1st May.

We gathered there amid the ringing of nearby church bells, sitting on hard wooden benches arranged in rows, which, knowing I had committed to nine hours of programming, meant that I was very glad of the cushions that had been provided. The format of the discussion that ensued was wonderfully inclusive, and nearly everyone who was there had prepared more than the set "homework."

In this first session we unpacked a number of aspects of Agamben's new research on the way in which life in the early Franciscan order approached the condition of a form-of-life that is not subject to law, because of a total co-incidence between life and rule. Agamben asserts that common rule did not govern the life of the Franciscans – it was not juridical – because there was no activity, no time in their day that was in excess of the rule. Agamben interprets the inclusion of manual labour in the Franciscan rule and "the will to construct their life as a total and unceasing liturgy or Divine Office" as the near-achievement of a form-of-life where the friars were not the slaves of the rule, but rather brought it about through its constant recitation.

Agamben's emphasis on this unceasing liturgy, which is the undecidable "threshold" of both the life and rule of the Franciscans, was of particular interest for many of those present, in part because of its relation to St. Augustine's meditations on time and presence in "Book XI" of Confessions. The regulation of time in monastic life constructing the conditions for modern capitalist labour, but also a model of common life, where a kind of continual present of joyful devotion to the rule becomes a form-

of-life. Krijn Pansters, who specializes in medieval mentality and religious culture, brought a critical voice to the discussion, questioning the historical accuracy of Agamben's assertion of the co-incident of liturgy and life in the Franciscan order as distinct from the life of other orders and clerics.



Day 2, photo by Yunyoo Kwak

What struck me about this wonderful conversation, was the way in which the continual redirection to different sections of the text as they resonated for each participant created a kind of collaborative line of flight through the text. It became clear that this was a meeting of people who all want to collaborate with others in imagining ways of living and relating to one another outside a capitalist economy of appropriation. The energy and desire for realisations of these “new habits” came forth in various ways, but perhaps the one that was most surprising was that almost everyone wore blue, which on the first day seemed to be a co-incident and then on the second more intentional, in solidarity with Christian Nyampeta's dying workshop at the Museum of Arte Util, for which we all brought a piece of clothing to dye blue. I particularly enjoyed watching two young men chatting at length over a bucket of dye, their hands in long rubber gloves scrubbing items of clothing with bars of soap-dye, that cleaned as they stained – a remarkably apt inclusion of the stitch 'n bitch format into the Museum of Arte Útil.

Nyampeta's works offered an antidote to what Adrian Rifkin, professor at Goldsmith's College London, described as a tendency of the works in the exhibition to confirm a kind of protestant sense of duty to be useful – the duty to “do good.” In one of our discussions at the museum, one of the participants asked, “Where is the desire?” I sensed a desire for a collectivity of difference in every moment of this weekend, perhaps most strongly when we were laughing together during Rifkin's screening of Roberto Rossellini's, *The Flowers of St. Francis*, which connected St. Francis's rejection of property (in the scene where he takes off his clothes in the square and returns them to his father) to the rejection of the Law of the Father.

[Use and Form-of-Life, Public Reading Group of The Highest Poverty by Giorgio Agamben](#)

29-30 March

Day 1 Casco, Utrecht

