

Transforming Communities

—Nina Möntmann

A group of children recording an old hippie song, a karaoke event dedicated to The Smiths, a dance marathon, children experimentally designing their environment, bands with different music styles performing a session together, a person experiencing a new place speaking about the shifts between her individual memories and reflections on being part of a community: these situations are a few examples that depict the increasing interest of artists in exploring different kinds of communities. Whilst the generation of social relations, communication, and dialogue is the critical component of these contemporary art practices, the “relations” are not as immediate as in the participatory projects of the early 1990s that were directly engaged with the public sphere. Involving the notion of community, those practices critically engaged with ideas about how to conceive public space, how to position yourself as an individual, and to what extent communities inform the quality of public space. Taking a closer look at some recent projects allows us to examine some of the different characteristics that construct community and eventually how we see, experience, and change public space. In the current political climate, marked by the collapse of various state-run forms of social organization and welfare systems, an ever-declining welfare state in Western European countries, the decreasing availability of social services in the US, and the loss of the state-run organization of social life in countries of the former Eastern bloc, personal experience is increasingly formed by the fact that existential responsibilities (health care, minimal maintenance, retirement pensions) are thrown back more and more on to the individual. This pressure of personal responsibility leads one to question the relationship between the individual and the community. Parallel to these developments, the interest of artists in investigating collaborative approaches within civil society—including the formation of new artist collectives—seems to be proportionately on the rise.

The specific political and societal situation of a place and its public comprise the background for public interventions and community-related or collective work. The public, as well as its counterpart, the private, are key concepts in the consideration of communities. Today, the public is at last acknowledged to be a problematic issue, unable to be engaged by the easy application of ready-made solutions. Reflections on the form(-ation) of a public space have subsequently shifted: from Jürgen Habermas’ unrealized ideal of a harmonious and homogenous whole to a space structured by diversity, in which different yet parallel interests coincide in conflicting relationships. Democratic theories, as expounded by Claude Lefort or Chantal Mouffe

and Ernesto Laclau, are fundamental to the latter interpretation. Mouffe, for instance, argues for an “agonistic public sphere.”¹

Given the current trend in public space towards more privatization, supervision, rivalry, and exclusionary practice, a homogenous democratic space in which extremely diverse interests might be manifested concurrently and harmoniously is unthinkable. Instead, the “agonistic model” describes a plurality of different public spaces. Acknowledging the dissonance generated by such plurality to be a productive potential of public space poses a new challenge to urban planners, politicians, the media, public institutions, and, indeed, to anyone who uses public space. Specifically, how do we deal with this diversity and channel conflict productively? Nancy Fraser posits that “participation”—without dreaming of “direct democracy” from ancient society—is an essential factor in this. “Considered together, these two ideas—of the validity of public opinion and of citizens’ empowerment vis-à-vis the state—are indispensable for the concept of the public formulated by democratic theory. Without these, the concept loses its critical force and its political perspective.”²

Such concepts of space correspond to newer or recently revived notions of community that represent a critique of both the 1980s communitarian, consensual politics of shared values and of Marxist ideas of community as a group united in class struggle. In his seminal book, *The Inoperative Community*, Jean-Luc Nancy accordingly demands that the radical diversity and multiple voices within a community be acknowledged.³ His notion of an “inoperative community” describes the collapse of any metaphysical figures, for example, a “fatherland.” The retreat of such a figure is essential to the concept of community as a relational social organization that is constituted not by the fact of belonging, but by the coexistence of singularity and by shared experience. Consequently, he proclaims the community to be a political project and perceives its permanent struggle against immanent power to be a central quality.

The issues of public space and community are closely linked in contemporary art. When citizen empowerment is formulated as an artistic goal, artists quite often choose a participatory practice. Since the early 1990s, this has led increasingly to work concerned with diverse communities. “Community-based art” encourages active participation in public space by challenging certain social groups, or rather the art public, to take action and communicate in a cooperative process. This poses the fundamental question of how such communities are defined respectively in the context of art projects.

The early 1990s witnessed significant interest in the politically serviceable value of artistic work. Ensuing benefits were intended to accrue to socially disadvantaged groups and debates on the topic in the US consequently coined the term “community-based art.” Such projects are characterized by cooperation between artists and a select group of people who have particular circumstances in common, and for which reason they are treated as a “community.” In the mid-1990s, Suzanne Lacy used the term “new genre public art” to present this new orientation of art in public space: “It actually is a genre of public art work, not in the traditional sense, referring to a monument placed in a central area of the city, but because it deals with the public in an interactive way.”⁴ Art thus defined does not take place in public space, nor is it placed there: it is by its very nature public. With the groundbreaking project *Culture in Action*, which took place in Chicago in 1992–93, Mary Jane Jacob curated the first comprehensive exhibition of participatory art projects in public space that aimed to work with local communities. In their hydroponics project *Flood* (1993), the HaHa group not only established a fruitful discussion forum on AIDS-education, but they worked together with HIV-positive volunteers to plant herbs that could potentially be used to help treat the virus. The artists Christopher Sperandio and Simon Grennan initiated the production of a “We Got It” chocolate bar, created by workers in a local candy factory in cooperation with a local chapter of the Bakery, Confectionery, and Tobacco Workers’ International Union.

In most of the projects labeled as “new genre public art,” community is conceived in essentialist terms and the participants’ identities are reduced to characteristics that they have not personally chosen, such as social exclusion, poverty, HIV infection, criminality, or use of drugs. Exclusion and marginalization are basic preconditions. The possibility of a “strategic essentialism,” a temporary “essentializing” of a minority group in order to enable political action and achieve a certain goal, as is suggested by Gayatri Spivak, is not available in this case, because in most projects under the umbrella of an art initiative attributed to a particular artist, a prototypical situation is set up, the symbolic character of which is not to be mixed up with political activism. Therefore, it turns out to be problematic that, in most of these projects, the participants do in fact have a political concern that may be stronger than their interest in participating in an art project. This, in turn, can easily lead to an inherent imbalance in the project. In this sense, Christian Kravagna correctly maintains that in many of the projects defined as “new genre public art,” “the lack of political analysis” is replaced by “a pastoral mix of public welfare and education,” which has “pseudo-religious traits.”⁵

To prevent art's attempted mission from being misguided, as in many of the community-based art projects that intend to be a model for "connectedness and healing," it is of fundamental importance to recognize the provisional nature of communities, which are in fact constituted at certain locations or for limited periods, frequently in order to deal with the local implementation of a particular problem. Such constraints allow solely for an intervention in existing structures or for an exemplary situation that might challenge the existing structures to be created for a limited period. In their article about community involvement in recent contemporary art projects, Carlos Basualdo and Reinaldo Laddaga pose one of the central questions concerning the necessity of both respecting and challenging diversity in public space: "How can very diverse intentions be brought together on behalf of unified actions that acknowledge their diversity as well as their shared value?"⁶ They answer the question with the term "experimental communities," a concept that acknowledges both the temporary and exemplary nature of communities in participatory art forms. The involvement in collaborative processes by individuals with diverse knowledge and experience appears, in this respect, to be an essential resource.

Projects with hybrid, experimental communities can be found, for example, in the work of Jeanne van Heeswijk. In 2002, for the *Face Your World* project that took place in Amsterdam and Columbus, Ohio, van Heeswijk installed computers in a bus that traveled a route between three urban "Children of the Future" centers, which are local community centers for kids. Children riding the bus were able to use an interactive program to manipulate, redesign, or reinvent their immediate environment⁷ and their urban visions were displayed at bus stops in interactive kiosks. The project united the everyday use of public transportation with innovative computer technology and creative thinking. Van Heeswijk's playful approach, using communication and collaboration to create a model situation, is situated between what is desired and what is practicable. This very notion of a model as well as that of a temporary community, or should I rather say "collective"—because this implies a joint production unit—is quite important in discussing an artistic approach that is in contrast to an imitation of social service. The aim of this collective work is not to create a harmonious being together of a group of people, but to produce a public sphere that meets common needs, wishes, and desires and which is designed following the creative proposals of those people who are the actual users. In this way, it interferes with the top down model for the design of public space—replacing it with a collective action on a public level.⁸

While experimental communities offer an alternative model for thinking about the role of communities within society in terms of direct engagement

related to or taking place within the public sphere, there is another form of participatory art, currently prevalent, that takes the form of seemingly sharing individual passions, tastes, and talents and in so doing produces informal communities. In most cases, this practice includes the production of a video, which is often shot without an audience and is then shown in a conventional way. Examples of this include works by artists such as Johanna Billing, Annika Eriksson, Phil Collins, and some works by Jeremy Deller. Collins filmed teenagers in Ramallah dancing to the point of exhaustion (*They Shoot Horses*, 2004); Eriksson produced a fusion session of rappers and a Brazilian *repente* band (*The Session*, 2005), where musical styles and their political undertones merge; and Billing's *Magical World* (2005) shows a children's orchestra in Zagreb rehearsing the hippie song, "Magical World" by Rotary Connection, as the camera alternates between panning over dilapidated socialist-era buildings and focusing on the concentration on the faces of the children as they make music with rapt attention. The social gatherings in all of these works form subjective, self-selected, and positively connoted traits that bind people together in an emotionally charged situation. The communities that are formed in these projects share mostly playful or light and soft moments that may well comment on the seriousness of a political situation (i.e. the occupied territories in Palestine; the music styles *Repente* and *Rap*, which represent two generations of the people's voice from the street; and the socialist regime in Eastern Europe) by producing a social experience which differs from the identification with a hegemonic idea of a community and its set of values. These juxtapositions can be seen as a meaningful statement of hope, as pockets of a productive "care of the self," in which the crumbling idea of a socialist community, the political indifference towards the lower class, or the ethnic segregation of the Palestinians make way for informal communities. Through these tactics, history may be rethought by testing the potential of the relation between small and self-defined common actions and the great political master plans. In this space of withdrawal, a poetic language takes over, speaking to the lack of freedom inherent in the historical, utopian plans of a big community united by class, national, or ethnic identity and replacing them with an orchestration of otherwise feeble individual voices.

There are models in current artistic practices revolving around ideas of "imaginary communities" that offer a step further in the direction of a more individualized sense of community that eludes definition through common features and qualities. This kind of cultural production takes place on a more abstract level, and does not necessarily involve participants. These projects lead one to suspect that, with hindsight on modernity, the conflict ridden discussions concerning the status of imaginary communities in a fragmented

public space might be raised to a narrative and symbolic-political level, from which real effects might yet still be stimulated. The works of Haegue Yang or Gardar Eide Einarsson, though in very different ways, are examples of imagining a community through symbolic style, language, or experiences of space and place. Usually this takes the form of small gestures in the actual exhibition space. Einarsson's skateboard ramps are objects of utility and minimal art objects at the same time, and his wall paintings imitate the "tags" of graffiti sprayers, but are in fact neatly done with a stencil, such as *My Scene* (2004). Einarsson's choices in form and artistic content retrieve the vocabulary of specific subcultural social formations, with the effect "to invent or reinvent forms of sociality from the perspective of visual art," as Ina Blom has stated.⁹ Einarsson's work acts like freely designed traces of imaginary subcultural communities. He is not only displacing subcultural codes that claim a certain affiliation in order to assert street-savvy in the art context; his work also experiments with the identification of a diversity of social groups that maintain a specific symbolic language: i.e. American hardcore, graffiti, or skateboarding.

The search for community in Yang's work is connected to a sense of place that is constructed by an individual experience struggling with abstract parameters. In this sense it is imaginary, but not utopian, and is best described through the notion of a "community of absence" or "negative community," which is characterized by a lack or a denial of any sense of belonging. In her fragmented installation, *Series of Vulnerable Arrangements* (2006), Yang creates a sensorial scenario of scent dispensers, reflectors, fans, heaters, and humidifiers that react to the movements of the visitors in the space. In this setting, a common sensual experience of light, wind, heat, and humidity unfolds amongst the industrially-produced scent of "Fresh Linen" or "Wood Fire." Paradoxically, this common perception of smell, temperature, or the feeling of a soft breeze on your skin doesn't create a community of people who are enjoying or suffering the same sentiments in the same place and at the same time; instead, these sensations are responsible for a very individual disposition that even separates you from the person next to you as they triggers individual memories, daydreams and thoughts that you probably don't share. In the video, *Squandering Negative Spaces* (2006), the camera wanders through rainy streets and places in Brazil, while the voice-over narration, spoken by a stranger to the place, poetically describes her search for a home in a strange place and the feeling of loneliness. This juxtaposition serves to question circumstances like place, time, and language and their ability to form a community, evoking Paul Virilio's notion of the "multiple solitude."

Einarsson and Yang use concepts of a dystopian, imaginary community in their work, which open up a space of potentiality: "These imaginary communities are 'nowhere,'" as Phillip E. Wegner states, "precisely to the degree that they make somewhere possible, offering a mechanism by which people will invent anew the communities as well as the places they inhabit."¹⁰ The anonymous wanderer in Yang's *Squandering Negative Spaces* seems to be in the state of "nowhere," lost in a place, making it a "somewhere" by relating to her own memories and by leaving ephemeral traces. The narrator parallels our own feelings as we navigate the exhibition space of *Series of Vulnerable Arrangements* lost in our own memories, which are triggered by the different smells, the heat, and the breeze on our skin. Similarly, Einarsson's absent subcultural communities, whose "tags" temporarily appropriate the art space and build connections to vestiges of art history that emerge from a distant limbo, function to transform the art context into a temporary place. This relation of imaginary communities of absence and the "places they inhabit" is crucial as a counter-concept to the capitalist notion of the public as a mass of consumers, as well as to the populist, political idea of a unitary group. Rather than opposing these concepts with the demand for a more expressive individualism, the ideas concerning imaginary community explore the concept and experience of absence and claim a singularity of individual beings without being torn apart or being bound into the whole, which is crucial for a nonviolent and just approach to "communion."

In the diverse forms of contemporary art practice that hinge on or produce experimental, informal, or imaginary communities, the definitions of community and of public space accord with one another to the extent that they abrogate models that depend on conventionalized identities—such as were essential to early community-based art projects that served to affirm communitarian ideals—and instead explore, in various ways, models and ideas of co-existence. The diversity and creativity of participation in experimental communities, the playful "care of the self" of informal communities, and the being-together of imaginary communities that build on the state of absence, correspond to a fragmented and agonistic public space. These new communities replace unitary and essentialist models of a community that are based on presence, identification, and immanence, referred to in totalitarian and foundational political regimes, and that underlay political populism. The concept of a "community" that refuses to function as a manipulative mass united by a common identity eventually implies the potential of resistance.

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¹ See Chantal Mouffe, *The Democratic Paradox* (London/New York: Verso, 2000).

² Nancy Fraser, "Die Transnationalisierung der Öffentlichkeit," in *Publicum. Theorien der Öffentlichkeit*, eds. Gerald Raunig and Ulf Wuggenig (Vienna: Turia + Kant, 2005).

³ Jean-Luc Nancy, "The Inoperative Community," in *The Inoperative Community*, ed. Peter Connor (Minneapolis/London: Minnesota University Press, 1991).

⁴ Suzanne Lacy, "Cultural Pilgrimages and Metaphoric Journeys," in *Mapping the Terrain. New Genre Public Art*, ed. Suzanne Lacy (Seattle: Bay Press, 1995), 19–47.

⁵ Christian Kravagna, "Modelle partizipatorischer Praxis," in *Die Kunst des Öffentlichen*, eds. Marius Babias and Achim Könnecke (Amsterdam/Dresden: Verlag der Kunst, 1998), 34–35.

⁶ Carlos Basualdo and Reinaldo Laddaga, "Rules of Engagement," in *Artforum*, 43, no. 7 (March 2004), 166–169, here 169.

⁷ The interactive program was created in collaboration with the media collective V2_lab in Rotterdam and Maaik Engelen. Atelier van Lieshout designed the interactive bus stop kiosks.

⁸ Other examples of experimental communities in art are the *Park Fiction* project in Hamburg, initiated in 1995 in Antoni Park in the St. Pauli district of Hamburg by the artist Christoph Schäfer together with Cathy Skene, and continued with filmmaker Margit Czenki, and district residents, other activists, and a landscape architect; and the work of the Turkish artist group Oda Projesi. A further practice that could be examined under the notion of "experimental community" is a type of community project that is characterized by its institutional form and which can be found in local situations where there is a lack of access to institutional infrastructure. In several regions of the Southern Hemisphere, for example, the few official contemporary art institutions are mostly inaccessible for young artists and are dysfunctional as part of the public sphere, and artists and curators don't have easy access to public or private funding. Examples include Sarai, a Delhi-based New Media & Urban Culture Program connected to the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies (CSDS), and Ruangrupa in Jakarta.

⁹ Ina Blom, "A Problem of Style: Art vs. Subculture. On the work of Gardar Eide Einarsson," text accompanying Einarsson's solo exhibition *Come and take it*, UKS, Oslo (2004).

¹⁰ Phillip E. Wegner, *Imaginary Communities: Utopia, the Nation, and the Spatial Histories of Modernity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), xvi–xvii.

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Excerpts of scripts from Haegue Yang's video trilogy:

Unfolding Places (2004)

When on a moving subway or a train, one can see what seemed an everlasting length of space suddenly disappear and come back, as it takes a curve followed by straight train tracks. I am interested in this kind of space, which comes into existence by visual recognition.

When first arriving at Incheon International airport, I go through the customs, pick up my baggage and then step out to the shuttle bus stop where I finally get to inhale fresh air. That "fresh air" is usually mixed with noise. If I identify this "fresh air" as the first element I meet when I arrive at a new place, it doesn't do the air a justice simply to call it "air." Every time at the airport, I am welcomed by an odd mixture of fine dust particles, polluted atmosphere, noise and visuals in bad taste. In other words, this air is sound, temperature, and smell. These not-always-pretty, quite honestly, noise, pollutions, weird humidity, and jumble of all these elements creates certain feelings and that is what I first face. Of course this feel gets dulled by time, therefore its influence seeps deeply into my subconscious as my routine takes shape. Naturally I do not know if it has any effect on me or I wonder if I even care about it anymore. But at the moment when I first feel this air, taste it, I feel a sudden sting in my eyes.

(...)

In other words, I come back to the road movie.

Late at night on my way home, there was a black woman, huge like a house, with a deafening voice riding on the same bus I was on. A few stops later, an elderly man stepped onto the bus assisting a very drunken man who seemed to be his friend. The black woman had been on the phone since before she got on the bus. The loudness of her voice set a record volume for me. The drunk old man would at times speak really loudly in spite of his friend's effort to calm him down. Whenever he uttered something, the sentence always started with excuse me, as if to compose poetry. His voice was loud yet resonant and his manner of speaking even seemed quite polite, though there were plenty of curse words.
Excuse me, hell, you are an alcoholic.
Excuse me, I am a Queen.
Excuse me, fuck, I know where I am.
Excuse me, the bus driver knows me.