Community Work:
Space and Event in the Art of Haegue Yang
—Lars Bang Larsen

The individual parts of Haegue Yang's installation, *Series of Vulnerable Arrangements* (2006), work in an ensemble as if they were the cogs, wheels, and pistons of a machine. There are scent dispensers ("Fresh Linen" and "Wood Fire"), as well as temperature, humidity, fog, light, and wind elements that embody time and space, and that come to life at intervals or are activated by the audience's movements. There are also black blinds and video projections of footage from different metropolises that hang suspended in mid-air. In drifting images, we see the shadows of people and anonymous spaces in Seoul, Frankfurt, São Paulo, and London. The voice-over is personal and introspective, disconnected from the spaces it speaks from or about. Everywhere in the installation there is time to kill… there are non-places… isolated functions… and a mobility that seems to have its own rhyme and reason. Like the installation-machine that re-produces a series of intensities and sensory responses, the narrator obeys a gratuitous yet all-encompassing desire that extends in many directions: "the heat in Seoul makes people heartless… several lovers are an absolute necessity." In her submission to logistics, Yang straddles great distances to find new places to speak from. Why not São Paulo? Whatever, wherever… . As Giorgio Agamben says, "whatever being has an original relation to desire."[1]

There are two premises in *Series of Vulnerable Arrangements*. The first one is that the subject is uprooted from geography and from community in the traditional sense of that term. The other is that Yang, willy-nilly, brings her community along with her, even if it is only in the sense that this is what she feels distanced from or left out of. You can choose exile, but, even when it is absent, the community will not cease to be an issue of subjectivation. As Binna Choi wrote, *Series of Vulnerable Arrangements* is a place where "one can enter and observe the distance between oneself and the organizing social structure of those objects [the re-arranged trivial objects of the installation] and where one is revealed to be at once a social and singular being."[2] We can call Yang's project a kind of community work, with the full implications of the pun on the special kind of punishment that entails sweeping the streets, or performing a similar task that will ostensibly reintegrate the anti-social lawbreaker into the community by dint of its humbling nature. This work is a kind of public confession, as it serves to let you know that you have been balancing precariously on the outer edge of the community, and that you had better get a feel for it again. However, as *Series of Vulnerable Arrangements* demonstrates, the empiricism of the community is more complex than this.

The strange landscape of immediate sensory parameters in Yang's installation asks what it means to be dissipated in the networks of parallel spaces and simultaneous times of the technological city. The question of community begins in your nervous system but it ends outside of yourself, in the social body, which in turn feeds back into you. For example, nothing is more *peinlich* (embarrassing) than your parents, simply because the things they say and do are inextricable parts of who you are. In a diary exchange between Yang and her mother, there is a description of how, during a visit to her daughter's place in Frankfurt, the older woman cannot figure out how the stupid European plug in the bath works and eventually floods the bathroom because her daughter, annoyed by her helplessness, ignores her cries for help.[3] When you are not located in the vernacular of your community but away from it, it starts growing at its extremes: it is out of reach or too close for comfort. At the same time it is strafed with absence, and it becomes futile to embrace it or react against it.

The many current artistic discussions about communities resonate with the critical demise of the idea of the "national." The national is becoming increasingly associated with the dementia of nationalism and its walling in of identity: a globalization hangover, just as it is intrinsic to the pathology of modern developmental history. This state of things is an ironic twist on the fact that revolutionary nationalism was a progressive force in the 1950s and 1960s, when it was an issue around which colonial populations would gather in order to fight their oppressors. Unlike these struggles, today European populists left and right use the tragic-comic specter of nationalism in a defensive, if not openly chauvinist way. In this perspective, the notion of the community offers a less historically charged and much more open terrain for thinking the subject and its social belonging.

The historian Benedict Anderson defines the community as an imagined one—imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign.[4] He explains, "It is imagined because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion. (…) In fact, all communities larger than primordial villages of face-to-face contact (and perhaps even these) are imagined. Communities are to be distinguished, not by their falsity/genuineness, but by the style in which they are imagined."[5] What is the style, then, with which the dislocated voice in *Series of Vulnerable Arrangements* imagines her community? In Yang's own words, the search for a community that goes beyond the simple distinction between 'home' and 'no home' is the search for what she calls 'a community of those who do not have a community': "In other words, I am thinking of a community of the

plural that shares nothing but ongoing self-examination and a strange kind of optimism. It should be a rather imaginary—not utopian—community, located outside of detectable and visible territory, maybe somewhere in my mind."[6]

This echoes Jean-Luc Nancy's seminal essay "The Inoperative Community" (1983), which builds on Georges Bataille. In this text, Nancy states that loss is constitutive of a community, which is thereby defined as being engaged in an always unfinished working through of its own identity. Nancy defines it as "…the community of *others*. The genuine community of mortal beings, or death as community."[7] In this way, a community of absence can be founded on the search for a place to keep the memory of historical trauma alive, and on sharing that memory as something that cannot be mastered. Or, as Yang puts it, it can be imaginary and optimistic as a way of leaving our individuality behind in order to invent a social self with and among others. As Nancy writes, "the individual is merely the residue of the experience of the dissolution of community."[8] Community is what happens to us *after society*: It is a post-utopian scenario, in the sense that it is not a particular ideological or institutional project, but rather temporary, local, non-legal, dispersed, and interested. It is an ongoing process of (re)construction, in which the idea of the people, the nation, and the society of producers, all seem now to be an increasingly remote possibility. In a passage that is particularly relevant to Yang's orchestration of space and time, Nancy writes: "But these singular beings are themselves constituted by sharing, they are distributed and placed, or rather *spaced*, by the sharing that makes them *others*: other for one another, and other, infinitely other for the Subject of their fusion, which is engulfed in the sharing, in the ecstasy of the sharing: 'communicating' by not 'communing.' These 'places of communication' are no longer places of fusion, even though in them one passes from one to the other; they are defined and exposed by their dislocation. Thus, the communication of sharing would be this very dis-location."[9] As always, ecstasy means being outside yourself, and implies a thousand possibilities every second. In this case, ecstasy is the consciousness that is never yours, but which you only have in and through the community that avoids the closure of communion and is always in process.

This would also account for the way that *Series of Vulnerable Arrangements* establishes a peculiar schism between event (the hectic air of the installation's 'functions') and space (Did something happen at all—did somebody see something?). This schism concerns the modern conception of time, a "meanwhile" of homogenous, empty time. A transverse time that is measured by clock and calendar, rather than by prefiguring and fulfillment, as in mythical time. As Anderson writes; "Within that time, 'the world' ambles

sturdily ahead." The subjects who perceive this sturdy—Anderson could almost have written "stupid"—ambling world are not *we who have been placed at the end of time*, but rather *I who find myself in the middle of time*, the modern subject who, in her singularity, is thrown out on a temporal horizon without salvation or damnation. The consequences that this secularization of time has for collective belonging is that, whereas all religious wo/men would eventually meet in the hereafter, we who suffer the modern predicament of having been dumped in the middle of time, can only perceive the steady, anonymous, parallel activity that spaces and singularizes other members of our community. Every day, we perform acts and rituals that are replicated by thousands or millions of people, such as reading the newspaper or watching TV, traveling or shopping, sharing the same sources in an almost ceremonial way while we observe others doing the same. The potential apathy of this simultaneous consumption is what is blowing in the wind of Yang's electric fan; we can also look at it through the plastic lamellas of the blinds.

In Yang's work, loneliness and self-doubt are pushed to extremes, which are posited on either side of this event-space fissure. On one side, there are all the symptoms of vulnerable subjectivity—desire, skepticism, and giddy idiosyncrasy, and on the other side there is a fatalism opening up towards the *other* and in which a non-hierarchical universality can exist. This is the gap between being involved and uninvolved in the events that unfold around you —the process by which your identity drifts in and out of definition. In relation to real political struggle, it is a position that risks indifference—exactly unless you take it upon yourself to work through the relations to a community, to togetherness. This is the location of the delay or resistance where contemporary life can yield to a homogenizing (state, economic, or cultural) control. Without a relation to communal existence, the risk is becoming an automaton in one's own subjective drift. If I don't have any affective ties with others with whom I share spaces and events, I can momentarily vacate my self and lend my (spaced-out) subjectivity to purposes that I don't approve of deep down, or that don't concern *me-as-involved-with-others*.

The art-historical family resemblance that comes to mind in relation to Yang's work is the destruction art of the 1960s and 1970s. The transitory elements, machines, and planetary concerns of artists such as Gustav Metzger or Niki de Saint-Phalle echo in Yang's work, as do the witness-like appearance of the artist and the ways in which she enacts disappearance. However, contrary to destruction art's evocation of historical horror and threats of extinction, Yang's disappearance is more a kind of existential limbo or pulse—if all of culture is rubbish, perhaps somebody in search of a community of absence is also a kind of detritus, loaded as she is with ambivalence? As the voice-over

in the video *Restrained Courage* (2004) tells us, "Vanishing is crueler than death: it implies the possibility of returning." In a diffused present marked by war and impending ecological disaster, there is a necessary relation between destruction and creation. So, when small colored origami sculptures in the same work are sprayed with black paint on a rainy street in London, it is a definitive and annulling gesture: but it is also a rendering of the assimilation of images that is fraught with negation. It is a hand curling up into a fist.

A trope of critical thinking that, in various guises, has been around for the last few decades, is the postmodern credo coined by Jacques Derrida: "There is no outside the text." This was Derrida's response to a world-view dominant throughout the tradition of western philosophy that privileges the idea that thought and speech are present to themselves. In Derrida's deconstructive reading, writing becomes the condition of the possibility of thought, and thus opens up an uncontrollable field of play. This idea was in a sense re-contextualized by Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri when, in their (anti-)globalization classic, *Empire* (2000), they state that there is no outside of globalization, and therefore we must catch its wave and ride it through to a communist tomorrow. Hardt and Negri argue that after the end of the cold war there is no societal order that contests a hegemonic, economically driven globalization, or perhaps better: all life on the planet is subject to the ideologies of such a world order. However, in his essay on "The Inoperative Society," Nancy can be said to contest this idea, or show a possible way ahead for the aesthetic and philosophical imagining of community. He does this by reversing a key term in today's critical vocabulary. In this way, and in accordance with the idea that "there is no outside," it has become, over the last thirty years, standard fare that the term "immanence" is a productive one; operative because it describes what is inherent to the cultural sphere, as opposed to metaphysics. Nancy, however, claims that immanence can only be guaranteed religiously, or can only be the promise of a political system that pretends to uphold an order by mirroring its own ideality, and in which death has a meaning (as it had in totalitarian societies that could demand and justify that the individual would sacrifice herself for it).

Turning the concept around and *making immanence homeless* is to cancel out any recourse to a moral high ground or ideological closure. As in Yang's decomposed narratives, this describes a different attitude to being present to ourselves and to community existence; an unwillingness to immunize ourselves against rupture, difference, or the impermanent. This attitude consists of neither melancholically referencing exhausted significations, nor taking the long Hegelian view of the future course of history over the heads of the mortals, but in embracing an embodied and communicative way of

sharing life, in order to ecstatically inhabit spaces and imagine events with others.

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[1] Giorgio Agamben, *The Coming Community* (Minneapolis/London: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 1.

[2] Binna Choi and Haegue Yang, "Community of Absence: Conversation with Haegue Yang," in *Unevenly, Newsletter 2006 #2* (Utrecht: BAK, basis voor actuele kunst, 2006), 10.

[3] Haegue Yang and Misoon Kim, "Bathroom Contemplation," originally published in *Metronome,* London, Paris, Oslo, Copenhagen, Stockholm, no. 7 (2001). Quoted in Haegue Yang, *Sonderfarben 1998–2001* (Berlin: Wiens Verlag, 2001), 26-30.

[4] Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London/New York, Verso, 1983), 6.

[5] Anderson thereby seems to echo the philosopher Cornelius Castoriadis, for whom imagination is a socially productive quantity. See *World in Fragments. Writings on Politics, Society, Psychoanalysis, and the Imagination,* ed. David Ames Curtis (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997).

[6] Choi and Yang, "Community of Absence: Conversation with Haegue Yang," 13.

[7] Jean-Luc Nancy, "The Inoperative Community," in *The Inoperative Community*, ed. Peter Connor (Minneapolis/London: Minnesota University Press, 1991), 15.

[8] Ibid., 3.

[9] Ibid., 25.

Gymnastics of Community[1]—Asymmetrical Movement
—Binna Choi

Everywhere Community

"Community" is an elusive and highly elastic term. The language game surrounding it seems to be almost without rules. Rather than trying to arrive at some more or less circumscribed definition of "community," it might make more sense to list and analyze its various usages. This is just what philosopher Lars Iyer does in a dense passage: "For the left, community activism might permit a grassroots revival of popular support; for the right, the return of managerial responsibility to the community cynically masks the dismantling of the welfare state. For gays, blacks, and feminists, the appeal of the notion of community affirms a resistance to false inclusion and to the erasure of specific differences; for politicians seeking re-election, the desire to produce a sense of collective affiliation is expressed in the appeal for all to recognize themselves as members of a general community."[2] Often, contemporary communities are marked by the postmodern commodification of human relations—Amsterdam's "gay community," for instance, has been discovered by the city and local businesses as an important economic factor and tourist attraction. Meanwhile, political appeals to community and togetherness often seem hollow and futile—as in the motto "Working together, living together" (*Samen werken, samen leven*), which was recently adopted by the new Dutch cabinet, a coalition of Christian and socialist parties.

Contemporary art also participates in the rhetoric(s) of community. So-called participatory projects or "relational aesthetics," marking a pronounced shift in the contemporary art sphere for last ten or fifteen years, cannot be explained without the notion of community. Such practices continually involve specific communities, ranging from various minority groups to the quasi-community of the art world, and in doing so they constantly invoke the notion of community itself. Undeniably, this signals a major change in cultural production; art is no longer primarily about interpreting objects, but is about constituting subjectivity as a social process involving the social and political becoming of the spectators-turned-participants. Nonetheless, skepticism and even bitter cynicism concerning these practices are on the rise. This development is not grounded in the somewhat conservative point of view that these practices are lacking in aesthetic empowerment (remaining dull imitations of social services), but rather in ethical and political concerns about the exclusivity and naiveté of the "microtopias" which these "microassemblages" propose, and which often remain mired in nostalgia.[3]