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]

Against this background, the question can be raised whether we should discard the very concept of community, at least in its current elastic use and abuse. However, we cannot deny the almost universal and inescapable need to deal with the agony and bliss of being together (either in positive or negative way). This is the field of the political, of political questions raised by social life—questions that are often oppressed by politics. It is in this context that Haegue Yang's spatial constellations are particularly compelling. Breaking with the ostensible invocations and instrumentalization of this or that community in "relational" art, Yang dislocates and allocates a space for a seemingly self-contradictory and elusive community. In her spaces, there are no groups of human beings, let alone any slogans or stipulated conditions for behavior or interaction. Instead, solitude and anonymity seem to prevail —as the negative manifestation of what Yang, referring to Georges Bataille and Maurice Blanchot, calls the "community of those who do not have a community," or the "community of absence."[4]

Community Nowhere

Whilst Haegue Yang's practice is intimately tied to the specific spaces in which she has operated, a palpable sense of absence hangs in the air of any space that she reconfigures. These spaces can be said to fall into one of two categories, that of the street and that of the art institution—of naked or protected space. However, given that both are the spectacular products of structural management by national and municipal governments or commercial organizations, it is not odd that Yang wants to reclaim what has been lost in both of these types of space—or, more precisely, what still exists in these spaces in a spectral and largely invisible form. But instead of trying to obtain full visibility for the forgotten or excluded, Yang limits herself to recollecting and evoking such social and historical phantoms, these *present absences*, either with documents or in the form of (quasi) monuments.

Two works from 2001 already take distinctive steps in both of these directions. *Street Modality* is a series of documentary photographs, a "field study" made on the streets. Here, the objects of study are the traces or remnants of invisible individuals; particular attention is paid to old and dingy chairs and seats put out on the street rather haphazardly, that nevertheless look "arranged." Devoid of any living figures, these documents open a gap in which the anonymous individuals can be imagined. Whereas crowds (of shoppers or of people hurrying to work) flow smoothly through the streets, certain anonymous individuals or small groups sporadically perform impromptu adjustments and adoptions in and against so-called "public space"—manifestations of socially

shunned idleness and boredom.

A somewhat contrasting scene is offered by the more secluded spaces of art institutions. Drawing an already quite homogenous group of visitors, art institutions tend to neutralize them even more by treating them as abstract, prototypical "beholders." However, Yang reintroduces social distinctions with her art-space "monuments," such as in the installation *AStA[5] Vips*. Marking the VIP lounge of the art fair in Berlin with a grey painted band, Yang furnished it with different sorts of tables and chairs, ranging from IKEA to second-hand and fancy designs, which she had borrowed from her "*precariat*" of arty friends in Berlin or from anonymous lenders. Avoiding any authoritarian, ideological stance, this work functioned as a temporary monument for absent and unnamable others and their lives. It seems that Yang wants to play host here to a fragile community of people who are not socially accepted or economically successful; in other words, one could assume that Yang meant to invite homeless people, students, or underpaid workers and make them visible and recognized. However, isn't it telling that only the furniture entered the VIP room, and not the owners, who would be unwanted and out of place in this space?

In Yang's video *Restrained Courage* (2004), there is a moment when she recalls happening upon a helpless beggar being beaten by a policeman. If this creates the suggestion that this work is about bearing witness to a form of "social injustice," to police brutality directed at the powerless, Yang slyly betrays this expectation and moves on, choosing not to confront the situation, seemingly remaining a non-committal urban voyeur. As a third person intervened into the situation to help the beggar, a voice-over narrates, "Although I felt as if I were about to collapse, I left the scene behind me and continued on my way." How are we to respond to this? Whilst the generic urban scenery of a series of non-places unfolds, the video raises the question as to whether or not Yang's non-participation is a self-critical portrait of the artist as a reactionary urbanite who both longs for a feeling of community and refuses to act socially, or if it is something more than that.

Jean-Luc Nancy's text *La Communauté affrontée* (2001)[6] has resonance in this context. There is a passage where he writes, "We need, of course, political and military strategy as well as social and economical modulation. And a persistent request for justice and resistance/revolt is also necessary. However, we should think, without pause, about a world, the world where we can leave from the given condition of truth, meaning, and value deliberately and at the same time suddenly." Nancy refers to the "present moment" when the quest for "truth, meaning, and value" seems to become impossible and the

tendency to search for a community of absolute power or immanence prevails; regardless of which side you are on, the minority or the majority, both have a potential for totalitarianism. Thus, he pleads for rethinking the meaning of being, of "being-with-others," in a space where absolute power or immanence should be excluded. This space is marked by conflicting forces and their interplay, and thus also by the distances or gaps between various actors (or beings). Nancy is adamant that facing "others," being in a relationship with them, necessitates a distance that, in spite of all, we should not fall into. This idea resonates in many of the introspective and even confessional thoughts and anecdotes presented in the voice-over of the video trilogy that includes *Restrained Courage* as well as *Unfolding Places* (2004) and *Squandering Negative Spaces* (2006). In these works, Yang takes the risk of exposing herself as an alienated and indifferent subject, but the emphasis given to her poignant experience of the "distance" that separates her from others simultaneously links her to them, and allows for their *potential to be-with*.

In *Unfolding Places*, during footage of various urban (non) places in variations of light and shadow, a voice-over describes a situation on a bus—about a black woman shouting into her mobile phone, a drunken old man talking wildly and his friend who tries to calm him and who, after all, abandons him. After a while, the artist herself, who quietly observed the situation, describes the moment when the distances between the others, and between them and herself, are revealed. "By now, most of the riders got off and the man, the black woman, and myself—of course there was also the bus driver—were the only people left." In another scene from *Restrained Courage*, Yang recalls in the voice-over how, during a very hot summer, she heard a neighbor's child crying and screaming for his mother. Rather than empathizing, she was irritated: "When I now think about it, I can hardly understand how I was only fixated, in an insensitive way, to the acoustic disturbance, without worrying about the child." The gap between her and the others marks the distance and, at the same time, sympathy we come to have. Gradually, the kind of relatedness and being-with that Yang is dealing with becomes more explicit.

The urban scenes captured in *Squandering Negative Spaces* are warmer and brighter (or more radiant in the darkness) than the previous ones. The entire footage was shot in Brazil, a "distant and totally unfamiliar" location where Yang made a decisive choice to visit. Her previous videos were shot in various places that she, like any other "mobile" art professional, happened to visit or pass through. Before taking this trip, Yang acknowledged how she was longing for a place that she could devote an emotional attachment as well as an intellectual respect to, because she had been drifting through so many places. But she discerned that the place should rather be imaginary in order

to overcome the simple distinction between this community and that or between "home" and "not home."[7] Afterwards, she confirms in the video that a place, a person, or even an object that she is in search of might be called her lover, and goes on to remark, "No one could probably compete with my lover. It is because my lover is none other than the time difference and distance." The commonplace idea of lovers forming a seamless unity has of course long been disputed. It does not take long to realize how vulnerable this ultimate form of relation is; the lovers' being-together is perhaps only an afterimage of the obliteration of difference in the moment of ecstasy, an ecstasy that is nothing but the extreme exposure of singular beings to one another. It is especially for lovers that the sense of separation sharpens, as they start to see the finiteness and the always-possible absence of the other.

Thus, in Nancy's words, "Love does not complete community […] On the contrary, love, provided it is not itself conceived on the basis of the politico-subjective model of communion in one, exposes the unworkings and therefore the incessant *incompletion* of community."[8] The promise of the community of lovers, then, is that of a community of absence. Lovers play a tug-of-war between their expectations and desires and what diverges from them. Their community of absence springs from recognizing the asymmetry of their relation, which, nonetheless, should not be confused with an absolute elimination or denial of communion. Only where complete communion —a union that erases difference—is mutually longed for and experienced as an absence, as an impossibility, can community be imagined and "realized."

Homes or Community, and the Outside

While Blanchot has provided a probing and sympathetic commentary on Bataille's conception of community and his attempt to create it anew, Nancy criticizes Bataille almost to the extent of denouncing him. Bataille cast a dismal eye on the modern nation-state and capitalism while at the same time discovering communism's inherent limits; both capitalism and communism focused on industrial production, and were unable to provide binding myths or ritualistic collective experiences. One of Bataille's answers to this state of affairs was the founding of Acéphale (1936–1939), a secret society represented by the mythical figure of a headless man. The experience of death, externalized in the form of new would-be rituals, was central to Bataille's thinking and, so far as this can be discerned, to Acéphale. Ritualized death enables one to experience dissolution of the ego, of consciousness, and as such it constitutes a break with the modern world that has no use for transcending everyday life, ruled as it is by the imperative of production.

"A world that cannot be loved to the point of death—in the same way that a man loves a woman—represents only self-interest and the obligation to work."[9]

For Bataille, Acéphale represented a radical "community for those who do not have a community," for which Blanchot would later pin down with the felicitous phrase, "community of absence." However, Nancy argues that this project is marred by a nostalgic and romantic concept of community —Bataille being indebted to the intellectual tradition that opposed the fragmented and technocratic modern *Gesellschaft* (society) with the organic *Gemeinschaft* (community) that allegedly exited before the onslaught of modernity. Nancy declares that "*Community has not taken place… No Gesellschaft has come along to help the State, industry and capital dissolve a prior Gemeinschaft… . So that community, far from being what society has crushed or lost, is what happens to us—question, waiting, event, imperative—in the wake of society.*"[10] Whether this reading of Bataille is justified or not, what matters here is that there can be no community of pure, ecstatic communion, neither in the past nor in the future, nor could there ever be an absolute non-existence of community. In the phrase "the community of absence," the word absence is to be understood to refer to the impossibility for any community to ever truly be complete and completed; it exists only as an unfinished affair. What is seemingly a negation (of the possibility of community) is in fact an articulation of the principles of insufficiency and asymmetry inherent in being-together, or following Blanchot, "in the horizon of" community.

Haegue Yang's artistic practice delineates such states of being together, such communities in the making (and breaking). This is what the question in the middle of *Squandering Negative Spaces,* "Why do so many relationships grow in an asymmetrical structure?," addresses. These asymmetrical relationships need not involve others; they can be found even in one's own self. Yang's own identity entails a fundamental friction between being an artist and being someone else, something other than an artist; these two ill-matched modes of being are nonetheless dependent on each other. For example, her installation *What I'd love to have at home* (2001) combines shelves from the company Otto Kind with a sofa by Egon Eiermann. What Yang misses in her home is what she can have in an exhibition space: the piece draws an oblique juxtaposition between her desire to make a home and the necessity for artistic expression, or between the necessity of having a home and the desire to manifest herself in art, which never coincide.

Here it is perhaps unavoidable to discuss the fact that the artist is geographically and culturally "a long way from her home." However, one must not succumb to the temptation to categorize her work as "exile art," diagnosing it as betraying a nostalgia for home. In Yang's works, "home" does not so much refer to her *Heimat,* to use a term from Germany, the country in which she has been living for years. Although it can connote the past and thus —on a biographical level—her native South Korea and her parents' home, it also refers to what is desirable and offers stability in everyday life, which is often expressed by the homely objects of furniture in her works. When she addresses her South–Korean origins, what Yang emphasizes is not her lost bond or identity but her distance from the place and the asymmetrical nature of that distance. For the simple yet effective *Remote Presence* (2001), Yang replaced one of the chairs in the café of a Korean art center with the desk chair that her mother used at home. At the margin of the art center, this object was the representation-in-absence of the space of unfulfilled encounters and communications between Yang and her mother, between Yang and her audience, between her audience and her mother, and between (public and mobile) art and (private and static) furniture. The notion of stabile "homes," in whatever guise, turns out to be illusory; we are faced with an outside, or more precisely: *we live on the outside.*

A recent piece, *Dehors* (2006), guides us to the very nature of the outside, leading us back to the community of absence that emerges from the web of asymmetrical and insufficient relationships. This series of slides, which reproduce Korean newspaper advertisements for big houses, resorts, or commercial buildings, is not merely a critique of the utopian pictures of places and houses in South Korea presented by capitalist developers. Photographed with backlighting, various news articles from the other side of the page shine through the ads; these frighteningly intact places for perfect domestic or corporate communities are now infiltrated with the endless and never fully readable stories of daily political or social events from outside, reflecting the lives that we plural beings manage to live within.

Wherever Community

In part through an asymmetrical dialogue with thinkers such as Bataille, Blanchot, and Nancy, Yang creates spaces where ideas of community are reexamined, re-imagined, and practiced, without ever falling for the dream (or nightmare) of a complete and definitive concept of community. One such space—converging many of the earlier spaces but nonetheless neither united or combined them—was called *Series of Vulnerable Arrangements*

(2006); it consisted of an arrangement of devices including lamps, heaters, a humidifier, an electric fan, and scent dispensers, all of which were made for corporate and public use, while smaller versions of all these products are also available for domestic use.

Standing dispersed in a semi-darkened room, these products each had their own basic sensorial territory, which was modified in various ways: becoming bright, warm, humid, or cool, taking on the smell of burnt wood or fresh laundry, and obeying different temporalities (not everything was running at the same time). The visitors were invited to walk through this area and undergo the succession of irreconcilable sensations at their own pace, and at a distance from other (unknown) viewers, or beholders, who could follow completely different routes. What communalized the visitors was only the meager fact that they were given or rather exposed to a space and various objects stimulating their sensorial capacities. The arrangement of the space was rather fragmented, working against a unified or "typical" perception of the space. The now exposed or "naked" visitors, who morphed, as it were, from abstract beholders into never-self-sufficient individuals, were occasionally hidden from the main space by blinds or an impromptu wall construction—they were perhaps bound in this present absence.

As delineated by Yang's practice, the notion of a community of absence should not be understood as a negative concept. Far from negating the potential of community, it allows us to think and practice community beyond the unproductive, romantic conception of community as a perfect organic union beyond difference, opposition, and asymmetry. It is the *affirmation* of community as a form yet-to-be-known that presents relations of asymmetrical distances that are both created and bridged—with shaky and ephemeral constructions—by insufficient beings. Every community is limited, but also enabled, by its inherent distances, insufficiencies and asymmetries. In that way, numerous small movements—albeit not a big Movement—are generated. And there is our hope, though *unevenly*.

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1 The title is inspired by Haegue Yang's recent work *Gymnastics of the Foldables* (2007), whose fifteen black and white photographs show a sequence of movement generated by folding and unfolding a common household drying rack.

2 Lars Iyer, "Our Responsibility: Blanchot's Communism," *Contretemps* 2 (May 2001), http://www.usyd.edu.au/contretemps/2may2001/iyer.pdf (accessed 27 March 2007), 61.

3 Walead Beshty, "Neo-Avantgarde und Serviceindustrie. Die Schöne Neue Welt der relationalen Ästhetik"(Neo-Avantgarde and Service Industry. Notes on the Brave New World of Relational Aesthetics), *Text zur Kunst* No. 59 (September 2005), 150–157.

4 Marurice Blanchot, *La Communauté Inavouable* (Paris: Les éditions de minuit, 1983), 9, 13, 45, 46. Blanchot attributes these phrases to Bataille but it is hard to trace the origin of the quotes. Regarding the expression "community of absence," Blanchot makes it explicit that it originated from the text by Bataille published in the magazine *Contre toute attente*.

5 'AStA' is the name of the (traditionally left-wing) student councils at various German universities.

6 Jean-Luc Nancy, *La Communauté affrontée* (Paris: Édition Galilée, 2001).

7 Binna Choi and Haegue Yang, "Community of Absence: Conversation with Haegue Yang," in *Unevenly*, Newsletter 2006 #2 (Utrecht: BAK, basis voor actuele kunst, 2006), 13.

8 Jean-Luc Nancy, "The Inoperative Community"(1983), *The Inoperative Community*, ed. Peter Connor (Minneapolis/ London: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), 38.

9 Georges Bataille, "The Sacred Conspiracy"(1936), *Visions of Excess: Selected Writings, 1927–1939*, ed. Allan Stoekl (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985), 179.

10 Jean-Luc Nancy, "The Inoperative Community," 11.