# New Communities

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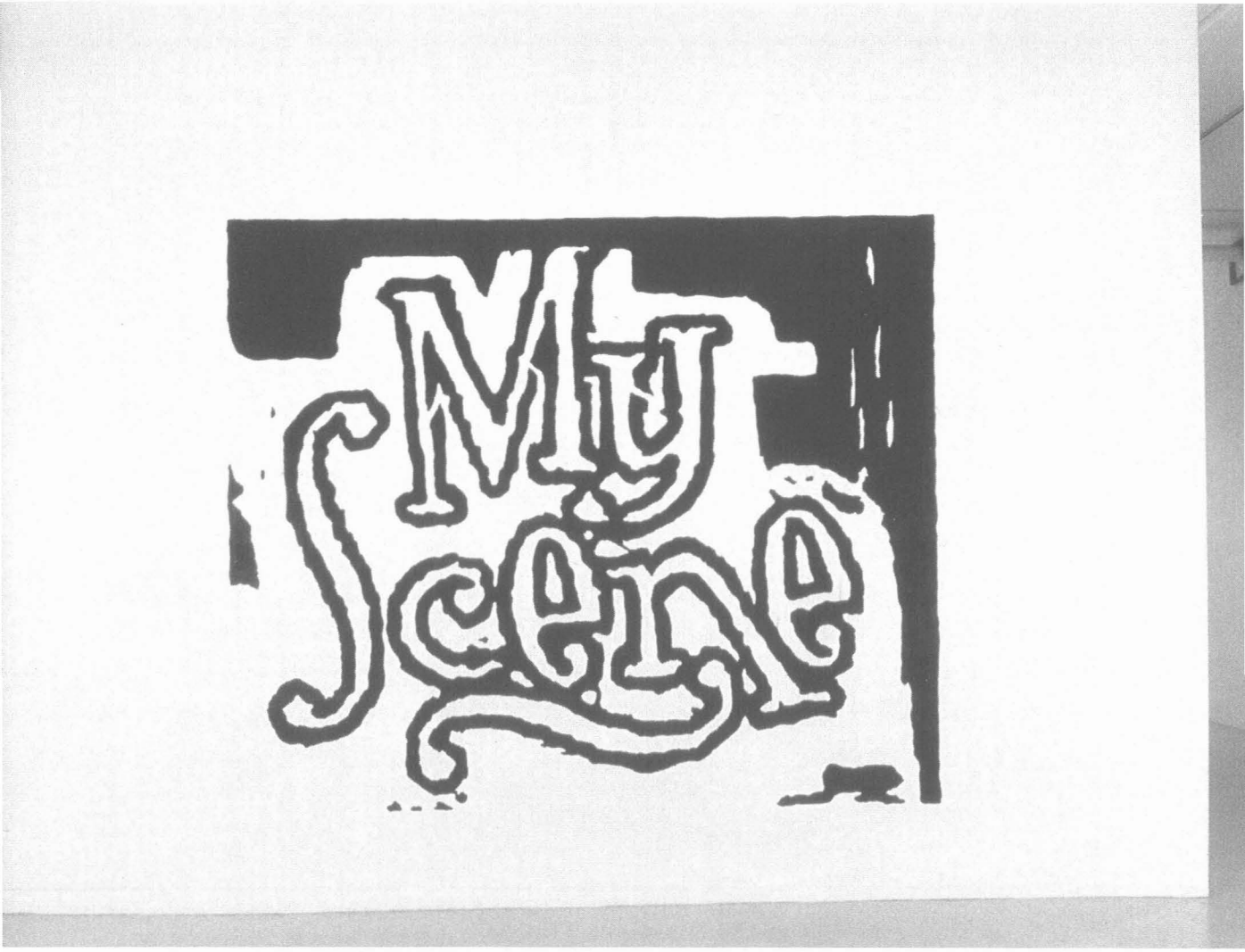


Gardar Eide Einarsson **That's not made for that** 2005. Courtesy of the Artist and Standard (Oslo)

The title "New Communities" suggests that there is a conventional notion of communities that is becoming increasingly inapplicable and hence in need of being challenged and replaced by newer models. The concept of community opens up a wide range of subjects embracing ideas such as unity, solidarity, and belonging in a globalized and, in many respects, post-national world order. The texts in this book, as well as the exhibition "If We Can't Get It Together: Artists rethinking the (mal)function of communities" documented here, explore the social changes and their contexts, shedding light on the various forms of new communities in contemporary art and society and their social responsibilities.

Examination of the ways in which artists are dealing with communities raises a whole range of questions: What defines a community—certain qualities, common interests, a shared location? What do we expect from being part of a community? Which communities are freely chosen, which are imposed? Who's in and who's out? Other questions revolve around the idea of a collective. What are the differences between a community and a collective? What does being part of a collective add to or subtract from the subjectivity of the individual? What is the artist's interest in working with communities and/or being part of a collective working process? Is it desirable at all?

Models and ideas for both these social formations—community and collective—are found in various art projects, in curatorial approaches where collaboration is a constitutive activity, in political activism and other societal movements.

### *What is a Community? Definitions and Critique*

Thinking about notions of community assumes a relational conception of self. Singularities can only gain their subjectivity by confronting the other or a multiplicity of others; before one can construct any immanent selfhood, one has already been called into question by the existence of others. Every subject inhabits and acts within a perpetually changing cluster of communities, many only temporary, some constant; many are self-chosen (e.g. specific interest or hobby groups, friends, parties), others are imposed (e.g. nationality or family of birth); one is aware of some, but not of others.

However, a relational concept of self also references what David Harvey called the "porosity in relation to the world of socio-ecological change, [which] tempers many theories of individual rights, legal status, and the like."[3] In this sense, the social construction of the self also includes aspects of political and economic realities. Thus, examining notions of communities always also implies insisting on the personal as political—the feminist dictum of the '68 movement, which, although its meaning has shifted, has lost none of its relevance.

Going on to describe in more detail what a community can be, we run up against many issues connected with the "(mal)function of communities." Common definitions of community often refer to the sharing of specific qualities as a precondition of belonging, positing essentialist identity factors as central in constituting a sense of belonging—being of a particular nationality, for instance, belonging to a specific ethnic group or religion, or being of a particular gender or sexual orientation. Likewise such definitions of community often involve local or territorial attachments. Operating with actual or ideological borders that separate a community from what is outside it means defining social groups through exclusion.

Many have adverted to the risks inherent in approaches that lead to conjoining and artificially connecting identity issues that are completely unrelated—the idea that the "good American" believes in God, for example, or members of a particular national, ethnic, or religious community automatically branding outsiders as "enemies." Fascism, of course, can be described as the calamitous outcome of an ideology rooted in the celebration of a constructed sameness that can survive only by eliminating the other.

Given the potentially fascist moment in essentialist, exclusivist concepts of belonging, outright rejection of qualities as community unifiers might seem to be the sole chance of avoiding fascism. Models of this rejection are found in Jean-Luc Nancy's "inoperative community,"[4] Giorgio Agamben's "coming community,"[5] or Maurice Blanchot's "unavowable community,"[6] which have qualities in common with Georges Bataille's "negative community"—the community of those without community. The Canadian linguist Milo Sweedler recently described the subject of all these approaches as "dismembered communities," an apt term, implying as it does that notions of "membership" calling for qualifying qualities in addition to an agreement or contract need to be questioned in favor of unconditional community.

The authors mentioned, while differing in many details, all oppose communal identities that eliminate singularities and argue for anti-essentialist communities of singularities whose only precondition is being in the world. Nancy, for example, speaks of community as a relational social organization constituted, not by the fact of belonging, but by the coexistence of singularity and shared experience. He sees community as a political project and perceives its permanent struggle against immanent power as central to it.

### *Communities in the Context of Globalization and the Changing Nation-State*

Social ideas of this kind are developing at a time when state-run social organizations and welfare systems are collapsing, and with them political developments that have given shape both to the form and the reality of our social lives: The continuous decline of the welfare state in Western countries that involves decreasing availability of social services, the complete disappearance of state-organized social life in former socialist countries, and the nation's declining power in defining community and its narratives. Personal experience is henceforth increasingly being shaped by existential responsibilities—health care, minimal maintenance, old age pension—which are being handed back to the individual. The pressure of personal responsibility thus creates further uncertainties as to the relation between the individual and the community.

But globalization and its mechanisms also facilitate and generate new social phenomena, global migration, for instance, which can mean a freely chosen lifestyle or, alternatively, enforced exile and collective dispossession. Or communication technology: This links individuals, and it also creates social groups and collective production (Wikipedia, for instance, or open source operating systems like Linux). Here, the individual is empowered through participation in public action. At the same time, there is awareness of an ideological and operational neo-liberal appropriation of social networks, collaboration, and participation in social phenomena. How communication is dealt with and judged in this context is also shifting. In the "meeting culture" of the neo-liberal business world, communication is often an end

in itself, displacing proper research and preparation. Covert and subversive communication strategies, which we can also find in some current art projects, or strategic communication refusal, are opposing mainstream communication, and play a significant role in molding the character and quality of new social formations.

As globalization proceeds, the national communities being imposed are undergoing radical changes. The decline of the nation-state can be described as a dissociation of the ideological construct of the nation from the political-territorial structure of the state. In a historically ideal form of political community, state and nation are coterminous, with the nation providing the narrative component, the ideological and symbolic backing for the state and its territorial extension. Here the nation provides a definition of belonging. Ever since Benedict Anderson's pioneering work *Imagined Communities*, the nation can no longer be thought of without the fictive and ideological backdrop in the process of its identity formation.[7]

Turning to recent post-national conflicts, at their most violent in former Yugoslavia, for instance, one can say that new nationalisms are emerging in the region. While it is true that no civil war or conflict is without a government crisis and a hegemonial decision concerning the status and character of the conflict, another aspect involved in these situations is describable in terms of Arjun Appadurai's notion of the "narcissism of minor differences."[8] Given these destructive instances of resurgent nationalist sentiment, assuming an anti-nationalistic position is a necessary prerequisite for any basic agreement on the future of the commons.

### *Communities in Art*

Artists are exploring the various ideas of social formations and their political and historical contexts, be it through *direct cooperations* in collective and participatory artworks or in *broaching the issue* of communities and other social groups that are defined by a common interest or agency, questioning a national, ethnic or religious framework. Therefore artists are not only providing images of changes in these areas, they are also participating in new forms of collective work and are creating a temporary model situation of community—one that can be experimental, provisional, informal, and maybe prototypical.

While the early 1990s witnessed increased interest in the politically serviceable value of artistic work, a focus of interest in current art production lies in the social imagination, in the compelling notions of transforming communities that are developed in an artwork. Recent models for art that incorporates social relations as an element of the art work itself need to be considered against a broader historical background, which includes the rolling back of Western welfare systems, the collapse of state-organized social infrastructure in former socialist empires and the chronic lack of institutional networks in various regions of the Southern hemisphere. The specific notion of "community" brought to bear in a given art project is, hence, inseparably linked to the views on action and co-existence prevailing within the respective societal context.

The focus of community-based art on marginalized groups in particular, who are encouraged to act and communicate via a cooperative process, with the aim of empowering the socially disadvantaged, emerged in the early 1990s primarily in the US. Also known as "new genre public art" (a term coined by Suzanne Lacy) or "connective aesthetics" (Suzi Gablik),

the various approaches taken all reveal an interest in art works that have practical value and which make a political impact. Rather than merely taking place in the public sphere or being placed there, this is art that is public by its very nature. Some examples were featured in the "Culture in Action" show curated by Mary Jane Jacob in Chicago in 1992–93, the first extensive and pioneering exhibition of participatory art projects in public spaces that focused mainly on work with local communities.

While acknowledging the motivation of these projects in an idea of participatory democracy, Christian Kravagna rightly notes that some projects defined as new genre public art, dealing with predetermined, marginalized communities like homeless or HIV-infected people, "lack a political analysis" and operate instead with a "pastoral mix of care and education" that displays "pseudo-religious traits."[9] And Miwon Kwon has pointed to the negative effects of US arts funding, which increasingly has turned directly to social projects, funding social work rather than art.[10]

Instead of attempting to take on the neglected social duties of the state, then, the challenge for art is to create projects with hybrid, "experimental communities."[11] Bringing together individuals with different knowledge and experience in a collaborative process is the essential factor that distinguishes projects with experimental communities from the art forms mentioned above, where a community is rigidly defined by one specific feature.

While these projects frequently place less emphasis on exhibition-context presentation, where they often comprise little more than matter-of-fact documentation, or interviews with participants, another prevalent form of participatory art aims directly at producing a video. This is often shot—unusual for community-based art—without an audience and is then conventionally shown. Examples include works by artists such as Johanna Billing, Egle Budvytyte, Annika Eriksson, Phil Collins, and Jeremy Deller, all of whom display a significant interest in music, games, or folk traditions as possible catalysts of a shared experience.

Another current trend brings communities together in joint action focusing on the physical, where individuals experience the vulnerability and manipulability of their bodies—life reduced, more or less, to its most elemental form. The subject can be, for instance, the finer details of human expression in a crowd, as in Victor Alimpiev's *Sweet Nightingale* (2005). Here, to the accompaniment of a Mahler symphony a large group in an orchestra-pit-like structure is silently instructed to execute minimal, almost sculptural movements. The delicate relation of largely powerless individuals to society is articulated in an eerie oscillation between presence and absence. The Israeli artist Yael Bartana presents a communal performance of rituals: In her *Wild Seeds* (2005) a group of teenagers turn their playful joshing into a parable on the Israeli occupation of Palestinian territories. Alimpiev and Bartana clearly present the human body as a political body. This more active understanding of a "political body" is countered by Santiago Sierra (and also by some of Artur Zmijewski's earlier works), projects designed as experimental situations where participants, united by their status of being destitute immigrants or unemployed, are subjected to a quintessentially humiliating scenario. These scenarios—thirty workless in Cuba having their backs tattooed with a black line for thirty dollars, or six asylum seekers being squeezed into cardboard boxes in an exhibition space, presenting the misery of the world to an art audience by repeating it—present humanity stripped to the point of physical and mental humiliation, and evoke Giorgio

Yael Bartana
**Wild Seeds** 2005, video still
Courtesy of the Artist and
Annet Gelink Gallery, Amsterdam

Agamben's "homo sacer," an outlaw deprived of all rights and reduced to "naked life." Symbolically, and in contrast to Bartana or Alimpiev, Sierra parallels the art field with an area unregulated by law, an area Agamben describes as the condition for abandoning human rights and resorting to physical and psychological violence that are not prosecuted as a criminal offence. Despite the major differences in treatment, the roughly defined communities in Alimpiev's, Bartana's, and Sierra's projects are united ultimately by the defencelessness of the individual in the face of power structures set up to control, discipline, or destroy them.

Then there are models in current artistic practice which revolve around ideas of imaginary communities and go a step further toward a more individualized sense of community that eludes definition through common features and qualities. This kind of cultural production takes place at a more abstract level, and does not necessarily involve participants. These projects lead one to hope that the conflict-ridden discussions concerning the status of imaginary communities in a fragmented public space might be raised to a narrative and politically symbolic level that might still stimulate real effects. The works of Haegue Yang, Hassan Khan, or Gardar Eide Einarsson are exemplary in imagining community, albeit in very different ways, by means of a symbolic style, language, or experiences of space and place. This usually takes the form of small gestures in the actual exhibition space.[12]

Where local access to institutional infrastructures is nonexistent, an institution-forming type of community project may arise. Sarai (Delhi) is one such group consisting of over thirty theoreticians, artists, programmers, and activists, as well as the Raqs Media Collective.[13] Regular local and international conferences and film screenings are organized. Research and publications draw on extensive networks established through mailing lists, blogs, and meetings. Sarai's *Cybermohalla* project (initiated 2001; "mohalla" is Hindustani for "neighbourhood") targets young people in deprived areas of Delhi.

Another group is the ruangrupa artists' collective in Jakarta. The collective's goal is to support the local art scene with research and documentation, inviting curators and artists to exhibitions, offering a residency, publishing the semi-annual magazine *Karbon*, and organizing the "OK" video festival twice yearly.

Both these groups are institutionally supported non-profit organizations, ruangrupa being funded by the Dutch foundations Hivos, RAIN, and Doen Stichting, while from the start Sarai has been affiliated with the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies, Delhi. What distinguishes them from official institutions, however, is their having developed from local groups and their resultant self-determined working models that are independent of visitor-count or sponsors', politicians', or press opinions. The kind of collective working process found in these artist-initiated pseudo-institutions supports Brian Holmes's cogent dictum that all collective work in the art field originates in political resistance. Creating and working in these collective structures in the field of art means fusing artistic production with the social, yet it aims less at visibility than at an opacity and withdrawal unknown to official institutions. Official institutions deal in prestige, the classic medium for prestige being a well-marketed exhibition, and add a high level of visibility in order to be competitive. Sarai or ruangrupa, on the other hand, are more interested in a non-prestigious clandestinity with space for research, informal discussions, experiment and failure, and the personal power of deciding what to share and with whom.

The distinctive quality of new communities is a processual openness based on temporarily shared interests, or simply on a fortuitous moment of being there at the same time. This replaces unitary and essentialist models of community based on presence, identification, and immanence, calling into question national, religious, and cultural contexts. It is neither locally nor culturally bound. Given the historic failure of the great narratives of community, this is a radical re-conceptualization of community refusing to function as an easily manipulated mass with a common identity. This new notion of community in art—compared to earlier models that assumed fixed identities (as patients, migrants, etc.)—is also a critique of the shared values, communitarian consensus politics of the 1980s that is still reflected in early "community-based art." Its affinities are with a relational notion of social organization based not on belonging but on a combination of singularity, otherness, and shared experience. Only on such a basis is it possible to start thinking in new ways about the creation of a newly defined participatory democratic public sphere offering models of agency that go beyond consumption decisions, but imply the potential of collective resistance. Hence artists and curators who provide concepts and images of "new communities" and participate in non-prestigious collective practice are becoming involved, as Nikos Papastergiadis puts it, in the production of "social knowledge."

### *The Essays in this Reader*

The texts in this reader explore models and ideas for both types of social structure—community and collective—found in various art projects and curatorial approaches where collaboration is constitutive, but also in political activism and other societal movements. The first three texts reflect collaborative and participatory approaches in art and curatorial practice

and link them to current societal developments. Carlos Basualdo and Reinaldo Laddaga's idea of the "experimental community" goes beyond traditional defining criteria of community and collective and strives to fuse being and doing, community and collective. In their article on bringing together communities in recent contemporary art projects, Basualdo and Laddaga pose a key question touching on respect for and encouragement of difference in the public realm: "How can diverse local intentions be brought together on behalf of unified actions that acknowledge their diversity as well as their shared values?" Their answer lies in a concept of "experimental communities" that emphasizes the temporary and model character of these endeavours that bring people of divergent backgrounds and experience together in collaborative processes.

Maria Lind surveys recent approaches in art that deal with social relations, such as relational aesthetics, new genre public art, connective aesthetics, Kontextkunst, and dialogical art. She explores the potential artistic agency has in collaborative projects and how such projects are related to theoretical approaches based on concepts like the "multitude" and the "inoperative community," or its roots in radical political thought and its reverence for solidarity. Finally, she presents options for non-commercial initiatives as against the current trend of instrumentalizing major institutions.

Nikos Papastergiadis focuses on current art practice's responsibility vis-à-vis globalization mechanisms. He examines curatorial approaches that have abandoned curatorial authority and collaborative art projects that institute inter-local relations with south-south and north-south axes, thus overriding the hegemonial reproduction of power relations in globalization. Given the neo-liberalist appropriation of collaborative and communicative working methods, Papastergiadis presents an alternative mediation mode for contemporary art, a mode, namely, that initiates "democratic dialogue between different people that can relate local experiences to global processes."

In the following section, Brian Holmes and Raqs Media Collective discuss new perspectives on affection and intimacy in the public sphere. Holmes presents a new operational definition of collectivity and perspectives for the Left based on a radically democratic ecological critique of progress. In his "Affectivist Manifesto" he argues for liberating affect and intimacy from the heavily regulated, overcoded social realities of neo-liberalism and for transforming them into new extradisciplinary modes of gesture and language. Raqs Media Collective looks at South Asian societies to reflect on the impact of privacy and affection in the public sphere. They examine private and public, their overlaps and intersections, which in a city as populous as Delhi unfold as a class-related and gendered experience. The European modernist idea of a neat separation between private and public has never lived up to its own promises in South Asia.

Luis Jacob, Jon Davies, and Emily Roysdon present local or personal instances of involvement in collective art practice. Jacob and Davies explore art communities and their historical perspectives in Toronto. Jacob elaborates on the circumstance that in Toronto of the 1970s and 1980s an exciting, glamorous art scene had to be invented by Canadian artists, isolated and peripheral to the US as they were. This art scene opened the way to artist collectives like General Idea, which, in the words of one member, AA Bronson, envisaged a "dream of one community, that is, a network of communities." Indeed, art communities are caught up in the question of place, of here and/or elsewhere. While the "here" pertains to

"culture by mouth," i.e. the question of audience and peership, communities of the "elsewhere" are a matter of "culture by media," of international networks and information gathered from magazines, other media, and artworld-jetsetting. Jon Davies examines the extensive video oeuvre of Colin Campbell, an iconic figure in the Toronto queer and media art scenes, showing how Campbell's practice was predicated on the involvement of friends, acquaintances, and rivals, who appeared in the work and were also its audience. As Bruce Ferguson remarks, this strategy "might return video to its initial, ongoing, historical conception as a tool of community interaction," while Philip Monk similarly ascribes to Campbell's works a "critical moment in the self-recognition of an art community." Thus, Davies argues that Campbell's different personas were drawn from his real social world and that his performers chart his community affiliations and conflicts. Emily Roysdon then presents her own practice in various collective and participatory structures, mainly with the journal *LTTR*, whose group of participating artists, musicians, and researchers see their work relative to histories created by such collectives as Gran Fury, Heresies, ACT UP, or Group Material. These collectives prioritized the presentation of peer work in a thoughtful, formal, public discourse and avoided utilizing the definitional power of the established "culture by media" (Jacob) channels. Instead, they set up a parallel system that creates both a platform and its audiences, its mechanisms of distribution and evaluation, and, finally, as Roysdon puts it, a "public discourse" within a self-chosen referential system.

Following the documentation and the artists' statements on the exhibition "If We Can't Get It Together: Artists rethinking the (mal)function of communities," the final two essays are excursions into the interrelations of ethics and self-concept in political framings of community.

Saara Liinamaa discusses complaining as a means of cultivating belonging and creating community. Complaining for her is a social practice that navigates the complexity of urban communities, positions, and investments, seeking approval. A complaint-free agenda, on the other hand, finds an easy place on the neo-liberalist agenda, offering cooperation without community. Simon Critchley, building on the theses of his book *Infinitely Demanding*, poses the question of community in terms of a triangulation of politics, religion, and violence, focusing on the potential of what he refers to as "mystical anarchism." Since anarchists, as opposed to authoritarianists, believe in the essential goodness of human beings, anarchism is also a political expression of freedom from original sin. "Mystical anarchism" contributes an ethical component to the notion of political community and presupposes a community of responsible subjects. Ultimately, the discussion is inseparable from a reflection on the politics of love, the act of love, namely, that demands a transformation of the self.

ENDNOTES

1 The symposium took place on November 7, 2008. It was organized in collaboration with the Royal University College of Fine Arts in Stockholm and part of a seminar and workshop with students over two semesters.
2 January 23 and 24, 2009.
3 David Harvey, "Spaces of Insurgency," in *Subculture and Homogenization* (Barcelona: Fundació Antoni Tapiès, 1998): 61.
4 Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Inoperative Community* (Minneapolis MN: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1991).
5 Giorgio Agamben, *The Coming Community* (Minneapolis MN: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1993).
6 Maurice Blanchot, *The Unavowable Community* (Barrytown NY: Station Hill Press, 1988).
7 Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities* (London: Verso, 2006): 178 (first pub. 1983).
8 Arjun Appadurai, *Fear of Small Numbers: An Essay on the Geography of Anger* (Durham, London: Duke University Press, 2006): 10.
9 Christian Kravagna, "Modelle partizipatorischer Praxis," in *Die Kunst des Öffentlichen*, ed. Marius Babias, Achim Könnecke (Amsterdam/Dresden: Verlag der Kunst , 1998): 34–35.
10 See Miwon Kwon, "Im Interesse der Öffentlichkeit," *Springer* II/4 (Dec. 1996–Feb. 1997): 31.
11 See also Carlos Basualdo and Reinaldo Laddaga's text in this volume.
12 See a closer description of Haegue Yang and Hassan Khan's work in the documentation of the exhibition "If We Can't Get It Together: Artists rethinking the (mal)function of communities" in this reader.
13 *Sarai* (Hindi, Urdu, Punjabi, Bengali, Turkish): an enclosed space in a city, or beside a highway, where travellers and caravans find shelter, sustenance and companionship; a tavern, a public house; a meeting place; a destination and a point of departure; a place to rest in the middle of a journey.