

If We Can't Get It Together: Artists rethinking the (mal)function of communities

Nina Möntmann



IF WE CAN'T GET IT TOGETHER Artists rethinking the (mal)function of communities

Curated by Nina Möntmann
Shaina Anand, Egle Budryyte, Kaja Dahlberg, Hadley-Maxwell, Luis Jacob, Hassan Khan, Emily Roysdon, Haegue Yang

Exploring experimental and imagined social formations, *'If We Can't Get It Together'* proposes that the idea of "community" calls out for radical renewal. Driven by as-yet-unrealized ideals, the new communities that take shape in the exhibition arise from our volatile contemporary moment of increased global migration and locally fluid notions of identity. Artists from Canada, Egypt, India, Korea, the USA and Europe incorporate such media as video, sculpture, installation, photography and performance to ask what effect these many emerging, temporary and provisional social groupings have on our understanding of communal and public life.

Many of these radical social formations incorporate covert communication strategies and secret dialects, or even reject language altogether. From originalist rituals to free-form networks, they offer alternatives to how the mass media and political leaders address an imagined, homogeneous public. Sometimes the search for collective identity is expressed abstractly, with feelings of belonging, as well as alienation, taking form through unexpected sensations. Artists approach public space and public action reflexively and poetically as they simultaneously express the desire to belong to a group, and to question the limits of collective affiliation. Must every community be formed through similarity and unity, or can

collective bonds be forged out of difference and disharmony? And what binds a collectivity together when its members' identities are constantly changing and in process?

Open-ended and elusive, unsettling and compelling, the artists in *'If We Can't Get It Together'* combine the forces of documentary, fiction and activism to approach collectivity in new and unexpected ways. Guest curated for *The Power Plant* by Nina Möntmann, *'If We Can't Get It Together'* highlights the crucial role of communication—and miscommunication—in shaping current ideas of community.

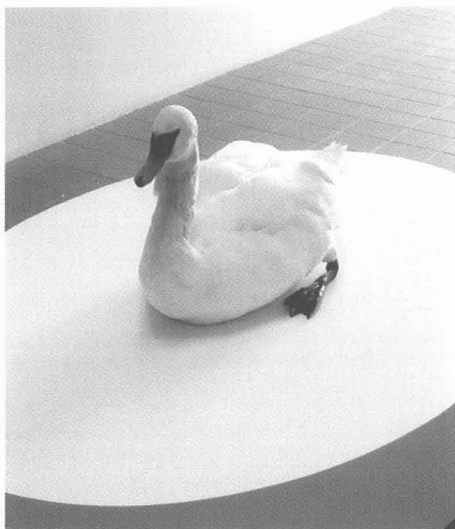
Nina Möntmann is Head of the Art Theory and the History of Ideas Department at Stockholm's Royal University College of Fine Arts. She served the Pavilion of the Republic of Austria at the 2007 Venice Biennale and was a curatorial advisor for *Monica 1, 2008*. A vice-president for *Artforum*, Möntmann was also editor of *Art and Its Institutions* (2006) and co-editor of *Neoliberalism's Companion Species* (2006) and *Mapping a City* (2005).

SUPPORT

An international sponsorship related to the exhibition, with a keynote address by philosopher Simon Dubrovnik, organized in cooperation with the journal *Public* and in collaboration with the Avante-Institut, Toronto, takes place 22-24 January 2009, with a special issue of *Public* following in 2009.

SPONSORS

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LUIS JACOB. *Shining* 2008EMILY ROYSDON. *Strategic Form* 2006

In curating the exhibition “If We Can’t Get It Together: Artists rethinking the (mal)function of communities” for The Power Plant, my main interest was to question common definitions of a community and to discuss redefinitions of the political dimension of collective action. In the context of global capitalism, a debate on the potential of a strategic “we” is gaining urgency. In this sense the exhibition explores shifting ideas of what a community could be: collectives and collaborations offer different perspectives on common agency within both contemporary art and society.

The work of an artist in particular is always implying decisions on individuality and collectivity. Belonging to an artist community, which is mostly locally defined, or collaborating within collective or participatory structure contrasts with the urge to stand out as an individual. Luis Jacob’s work *Shining* (2008), for example, touches upon exactly these questions of the safe haven of the artist community versus the loneliness of the individual “art star.” The taxidermic sculpture of a swan proceeds from a previous work: it stands in dialectical relationship with a flock of taxidermic pigeons he realized in 2006, sited in the same spot at The Power Plant. If the pigeons could stand for an “artist community” in a moment of transition propelled by the institutional context of The Power Plant, then the swan is the “solitary figure,” maybe even the art star singled out for exceptionality. This figure stands apart from the flock, unique and proud. Emily Roysdon, by contrast, explores the image of a community through the mode of self-representation. The photos taken by a group of young people of themselves while forming a human pyramid show a crucial moment of self-recognition marked by exposure. *Strategic Form* (2006) strives to create an imagined body of resistance, celebrating collectivity.

While Roysdon is bringing a group of people together in a joint activity, Hassan Khan is capturing the “multiple solitude” of the virtual community of television viewers in the

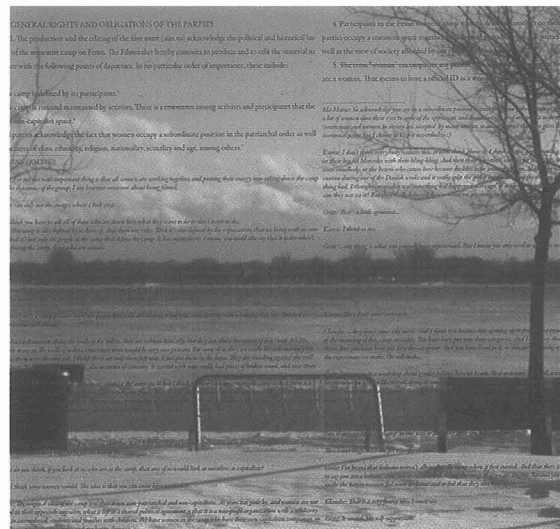
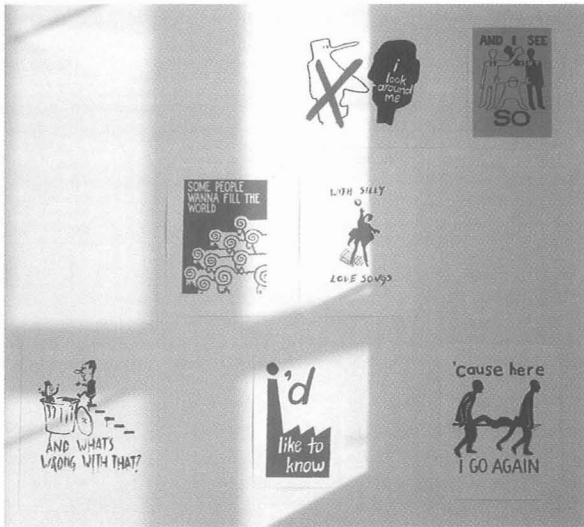
HASSAN KHAN. *Host* 2008SHAINA ANAND. *Khirkheeyaan* 2006KAJSA DAHLBERG. *Framework for a Sanctuary* 2008

image of a quiz show presenter.¹ For his work *Host* (2008), he took a screenshot of the presenter with his mobile phone, in the moment when she is holding up her hands with fingers apart to indicate the number 10, and we can only assume that she is promising the winner a prize of 10,000 Euro (the image was taken in Germany). In the process of making a drawing of the photo, which was then used as the basis for an etching which would subsequently be printed onto vinyl, Khan deprived the figure of the context of the quiz show—the quiz question that appeared on the screen, the stage set, the phone numbers to call—rendering the shallow one-way communication with an invisible audience an enigmatic moment of self-exposure.

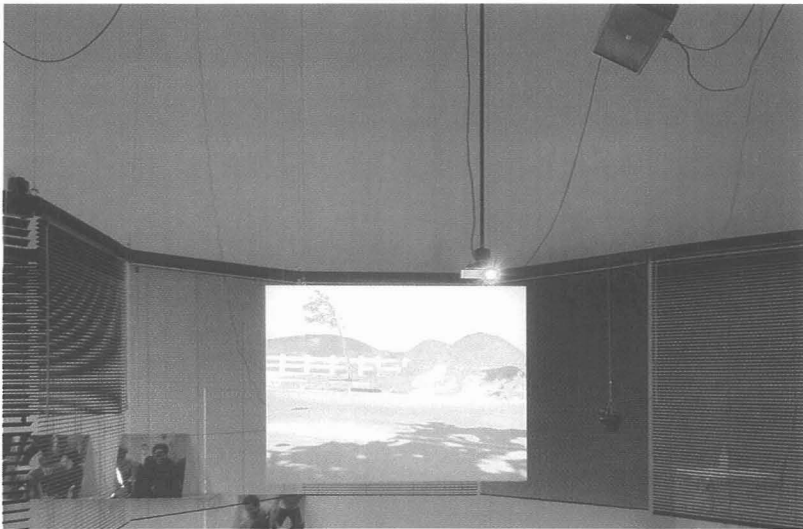
While Roysdon and Khan focus on the image, Shaina Anand explores modes of self-representation by connecting inhabitants of a neighborhood in Delhi and putting them in dialogue. For *Khirkheeyaan* (2006), Anand used cheap surveillance technology to create an open-circuit network and feedback interface for communication between people in a neighborhood in New Delhi. The generated conversations—about everyday lives and livelihoods—mirror the moods and needs of a post-liberalized precariat and migrant population.

For her installation *Framework for a Sanctuary* (2008), Kajsa Dahlberg was approaching an alleged feminist project by temporarily joining the self-chosen community of a women's camp. The video describes the work of packing down the camp on Femø in Denmark, the oldest still active women-only camp. The process of documenting the place and its participants is juxtaposed with a written agreement the artist struck with the women of the camp outlining terms and definitions, around what we see. In the end Dahlberg was hunting the ghost of feminism in a community that was to her surprise not really interested in political objectives. Hadley+Maxwell also investigate the repercussions of a past collective idea and emancipatory political movement. *Gloomy Sunday* (2006) contains a video reconstruction of

HADLEY+MAXWELL. *Silly Love Songs*, 2004EGLEBUDVYTYTE. *Secta* 2006

the widely-disseminated media image of a student slain during the protests at Kent State University in 1970. The melancholic spirit evoked by the video/sound piece mourns the broken dreams of a collective resistance striving for peace and freedom.

Looking to the future of community agreements, Egle Budvytyte shapes a utopian narrative of a secret open-source community. In her video *Secta* (2006), a group of people loosely connected by the strange rituals that they perform in public, and which don't pursue any aim (licking fruit they find in the market, shaving their legs in public, hanging on trees, always smiling), form an unconditional community. Their common activities are ungraspable, undefined and "open-source," which would seem to defeat any essentialist definition of a community. They are good for nothing, evoking Jean-Luc Nancy's "Inoperative Community," in which dreams of union or immanence are abandoned in favor of a new definition of a community of singularities. In the voiceover of Haegue Yang's video, *Squandering Negative Spaces* (2006), which is the central part of her installation *Domestics of Community*, we find some poetic repercussions of the writings on unconditional communities, here mainly by Maurice Blanchot and Georges Bataille. 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 foreign place and the feeling of loneliness: "In how many places have I walked the streets, only to familiarize them? How many streets have I gone to without resistance for no particular reason? To tame myself in the world of the others, or perhaps to assimilate myself. This is a very lonely process of self-colonization... However, one cannot abandon the loneliness, isolation, and pain generated when one makes the foreign land a homeland; when one makes oneself—an outsider—an insider; when one simply let one's rude thoughts become tame." This lonely search for home and belonging is questioning circumstances like place, time and language and their ability to



Installation shots at The Power Plant courtesy of Rafael Goldchain

HAEGUE YANG. *Domestics of Community-Version Toronto 2008*

form a community. But with what could they be replaced? Following Yang's lonely traveler, Paul Virilio's notion of the "multiple solitude" comes to mind.

Covert and subversive communication strategies play a significant role in creating the character and quality of the new social formations explored by the artists in the exhibition. Dominant modes of communication are meant to connect people but often inadvertently alienate us from one another. New communities oppose these dominant forms with a subversive language designed to establish and foster connections and networks. Secret dialects, different languages and translations, or even the complete refusal of communication are democratic necessities in this radical recreation of community. Above that, poetic and philosophic approaches inform the idea of a community without common features that is instead defined by the individual experience of a place, or simply of being in the world next to one another.

The exhibition "If We Can't Get It Together" presents the work of artists who are addressing questions of community in numerous ways: They are exposing the malfunctions of existing historic and contemporary communities; providing ideas and images of "new communities" and their potential for collective agency; analytically or imaginatively questioning relational conceptions of self and are participating in collective practice or creating images and narratives of the social. Through these activities, these works become involved in the production of social knowledge.

1 "The resistance of distances having ceased, the lost world will send us back to our solitude, a multiple solitude of some billions of individuals whom the multi media are preparing to organize in quasi cybernetic fashion." Paul Virilio, *Open Sky*, London (Verso), 1998, p.128.



Shining, 2008, taxidermy swan. Courtesy of Birch Libralato, Toronto

Luis Jacob:

“*Shining* (2008) is a sculpture originally presented within the Fleck Clerestory at The Power Plant for the exhibition. Its natural whiteness mimics that of the prototypical “white cube” exhibition space, imbuing the object and the space it commands—art’s space—with a sense of self-referential dignity and calm self-composure.

A dazzling white swan is stranded on an oval pedestal, its visible black feet serving as unsightly reminders of its leaden groundedness and timeless repose. It is said: “no man is an island”—but why not? The sculpture sets itself apart from the lively hubbub of the world to stand within the luminosity of its apartness. And this is precisely what we expect art to do. If it is to count as “art” at all, an object must renounce the life-energies from which it arose and posit itself as its own self-sufficient ground. But it must do so deceptively, derivatively, brilliantly—and thus preserve the “unconscious” of the energies which it pretends to renounce.

A lone white swan located where, previously, thirty grey pigeons had been. Regular visitors to The Power Plant may recall the presence two years earlier—in the exhibition “We Can Do This Now” curated by Gregory Burke and Helena Reckitt—of another sculpture, titled *From Stream to Golden Stream* (2006), also located within the same clerestory space: thirty taxidermy pigeons suspended from the ceiling to compose a flock in mid-flight. In the movement from flock of pigeons to singular swan, from flight to rest, a transformation will have taken place, and *Shining* now appears in that light as a condensation of what was there before. This transformation is accomplished by the figure of “the recurrent visitor.” Such a visitor recurs to the extent that he or she is able to bring into the frame what the object of appearance occludes by its obvious presence. He or she is able to look through the deceptive presence of what is there, towards the grounding influence of what is no longer and not yet there, look through the self-sufficiency of the autonomous work of art to the energies from which it emerged and the context that gives it sense, and look through the sovereignty of the artistic “author” to the shared and nameless milieu which each author must gather into itself and refract.

Art is the realm of appearance, and life is what in its animated form (in being lived) cannot appear. Life appears within the space carved out by the work of art, but it appears in a life-like form, brilliant and dazzling to the eyes. Finally, then, a recurrent visitor “recurs”—repeats itself—to the degree that the visitor makes his or her field of experience available to the correspondences of artistic forms: to the mirror-like play between form and form, and the metonymic chains of association between forms and dimensions of the viewer’s own life-experience. “Recurrence,” then, is simply another word for the radiant quality of attentive aesthetic reception, the necessary “light” that grants presence and white inwardness to the artistic object.”



Strategic Form, 2006, installation: 11 colour photographs 68.6 cm square, plexi mounted wooden shelves with brackets, stencils and paint, 4 shelves 212.4 cm long, 33 cm wide, and 2 cm thick, 1 shelf half length. Courtesy of the Artist

Emily Roysdon:

“ *Strategic Form* (2006) is the plural of our being-in-common, the body of potential. The project strives to create an imagined body of resistance, a portraiture of possibility complicated by exposure and maintenance. Imaging endurance, isolation, and convivial doggy-doubled bodies uniting to raise their voices against the heroic memorial subject of historical representation. Fictional, aestheticized, ironic, these appearances celebrate collectivity. Plural Possible Powerful ! Historical Hysteric !

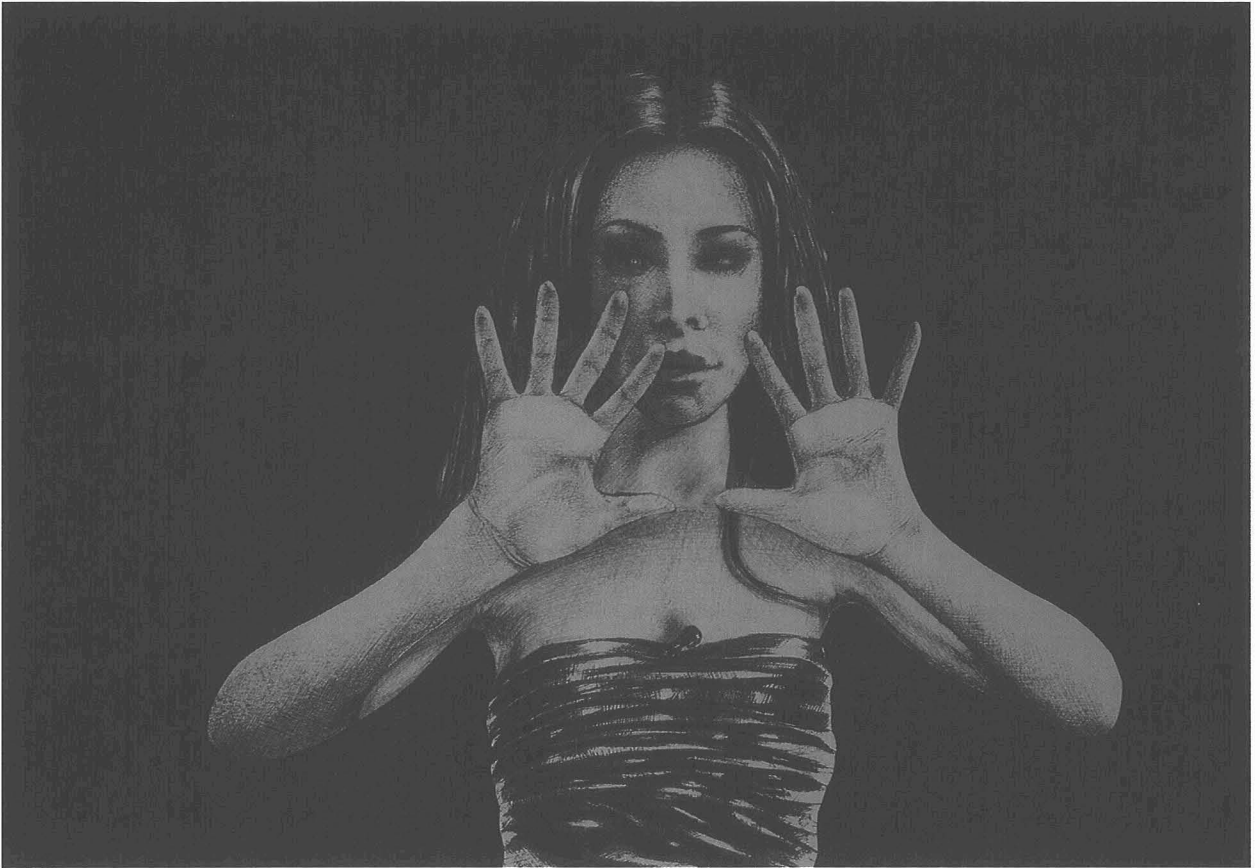
The possibility between faces and forces unites these bodies in language. They are pieces mounting communicability and mounting each other for a chance to recognize competence with each character turning out their idealized look of comfort and collapse, desire and disintegration. A crucial moment of self-recognition marked by exposure. Captured, recorded, memorialized.

Strategic Form is the relational recreational death image exposed of love and labor. ”



Surprise... you're pregnant!
2007-9, glasses, acetate.
In collaboration with la.Eyeworks
Courtesy of the Artist

“ Making a literal frame for questions of legibility and agency, these glasses are a surprising and humorous conversation piece. Making the gaze manifest, the person wearing this work has their perspective elaborated for all to see. Provoking conversations about gender and recognition, objecthood and form, dominance and self-possession, the piece elicits a revisioning of how we read and approach each other. ”



Host, 2008, colour print from engraving, 230 cm x 300 cm. Courtesy of Chantal Crousel, Paris

Hassan Khan:

“A warm television set lights up a room in the Agon Hotel in Berlin. A game-show host communicates with her television audience: attempting to convince, entice, seduce, coax them into playing a game about the circulation of capital. A cell phone camera captures an instant, revealing a curiously opaque image otherwise invisible in the real-time flow of television. Now, the host is frozen in an enigmatic gesture that refuses explanation or translation. The image is taken, casually, from a TV screen—the surface of a daily transmission—yet remains unreadable even as spectacle, tied stubbornly instead to gesture and presence: a counterweight potent enough to puncture the whole edifice of televised viewing.

The cell phone image is transformed as it is passes through various media. From the cell phone it is transferred to a computer, where its cleaned up in Photoshop. Next, it is copied by an illustrator under guidance from the artist, and finally etched by a master engraver to produce a print. The series of transferrals heightens the moment of a complex, almost intuitive and non-verbal communication between the host and her invisible audience informed by complex and contradictory influences.”



Khirkeeyaan, 2006, detail, 7 monitors and headphones, wiring diagram. Courtesy of the Artist

Shaina Anand:

“ The seven “episodes” of this work were born out of seven sets of installations of security cameras and wiring in Khirkee Extension. The surprising thing was not that we were able to use such technology to “communicate,” but that this combination of surveillance equipment, household televisions and neighbours produced such an easy fit, such a ludic inversion of its technical and social context.

CCTV cameras of the type used here cost about \$25US and are growing cheaper by the day. Large numbers are now installed in shops, restaurants and small businesses, even in places like Khirkee Extension which is an urban village like many situated right inside the city of Delhi. Such CCTV cameras produce images that are cheap and plentiful... images of one’s “own” space, of territory, where watching becomes a protective act, the default mode of looking.

In 2006, when *Khirkeeyaan* (2006) was made, the predominant landscape of images was still (as it has been for the past couple of decades) television. The security-camera quad produces a set of four “holes” in the surface of television. The fact that people who face the camera also face each other, while also facing their familiar TV sets, produces a tension in the TV image: through questioning whether it is an open or closed circuit, reducing communication to a “grid” of speaking and listening, and by forcing a sense of physical immediacy and proximity.

Khirkee Extension is fractured by all sorts of lines: caste, religion, money, new and old settlers from different regions. It was once a feudal village, whose “extension” has been claimed and settled in cycles since partition. It is now full of migrant labour, sitting close to upper-caste land owners, all of whom are threatened by large urban developments close by. *Khirkeeyaan’s* traversals of this terrain, its conversations, its double logic of “safety” (in one’s own home) and self-exposure, enters directly into the space produced by the non-overlap of land-based politics, and global communication networks.”



Framework for a Sanctuary, 2008, video still. Courtesy of the Artist

Kajsa Dahlberg:

“
CONTRACT CONCERNING THE PRODUCTION OF A FILM ABOUT THE WOMEN’S CAMP ON THE ISLAND OF FEMØ.
”

...

5. The term “woman” encompasses any person who identifies as a woman. You are welcome on Femø if you are a woman. That means to have an official ID as a woman, fully operated and accepted by the Danish Government.⁹

9 Claudie: I don't think the camp is really open (yet) to every person who identify as a "woman". My very personal definition of what the term "woman" IN THE CAMP incorporates is: A person who has been placed into the category "female" by medical/legal/societal/familial definitions around birth, who still lives in it, redefining, transgressing, fighting against, broadening, subverting, celebrating it etc. and who comes to the camp to share one week of holidays, forgetting the limitations of male/female dichotic categories and the expectations of what and who a "woman" is or is supposed to be, do, feel, think, love, have sex with, enjoy the company of etc....

Ida Marie: You are welcome on Femø if you are a woman. That means to have an official ID as a woman, fully operated and accepted by the Danish Government. This is the policy of the Femø Association.

Gritt: The gender police.

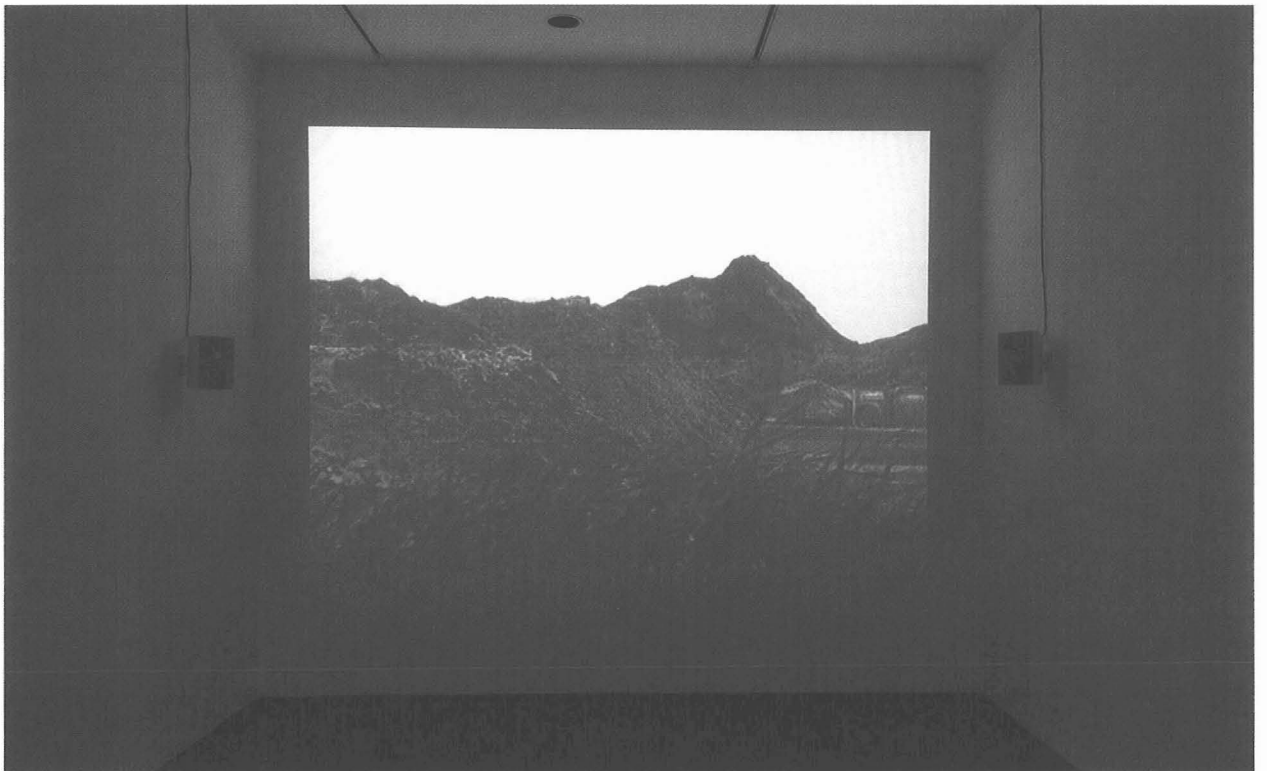
Claudie: That also involves surgery, doesn't it?

Karen: Of course it does, you cannot get the right number on your ID card unless you've gone through surgery.

Gritt: Or perhaps you can be in transition?

Claudie: And if you decide against surgery then you can't come. Because as I said before it's all closely connected to the experiences we make in a category. I think this is an interesting point: Is it enough to self-define? Maybe there could be a week were the topic would be for people who have been put into this category very early in lives to talk to people who decided later in their life that they want live in this category. Including all the aspects. But then it should be clear that this is about the experiences we make in our lives. And not jut about inclusion or exclusion because that has this random feeling to it.

Juliane: Normally what is decided in Copenhagen is really important. You talk about it and you bring in into the seminar and you make the decision for the next year and I think it's a good idea. It takes time, the issue of transgendered people has been discussed for five years or something.



Secta, 2006, single channel video projection, 5 min, 56 sec. Courtesy of Explum 07

Egle Budvytyte:

“ ‘It is not clearly dated when or where exactly this Secta—network of people—appeared...It is stated that it might have originated in the woods of Lithuania around the 17th century. They do not belong to any specific geographic location, they are drifting around leaving no obvious signs of their presence...They frequently change their names because they believe that spirits might take them over and change who they are. The members of Secta do not know that they belong to it. They share a secret, which connects them and will connect “‘til the never end.”The secret is the ritual...There are no special places or temples committed for it. Random and transitional places are suitable to practice the ritual.

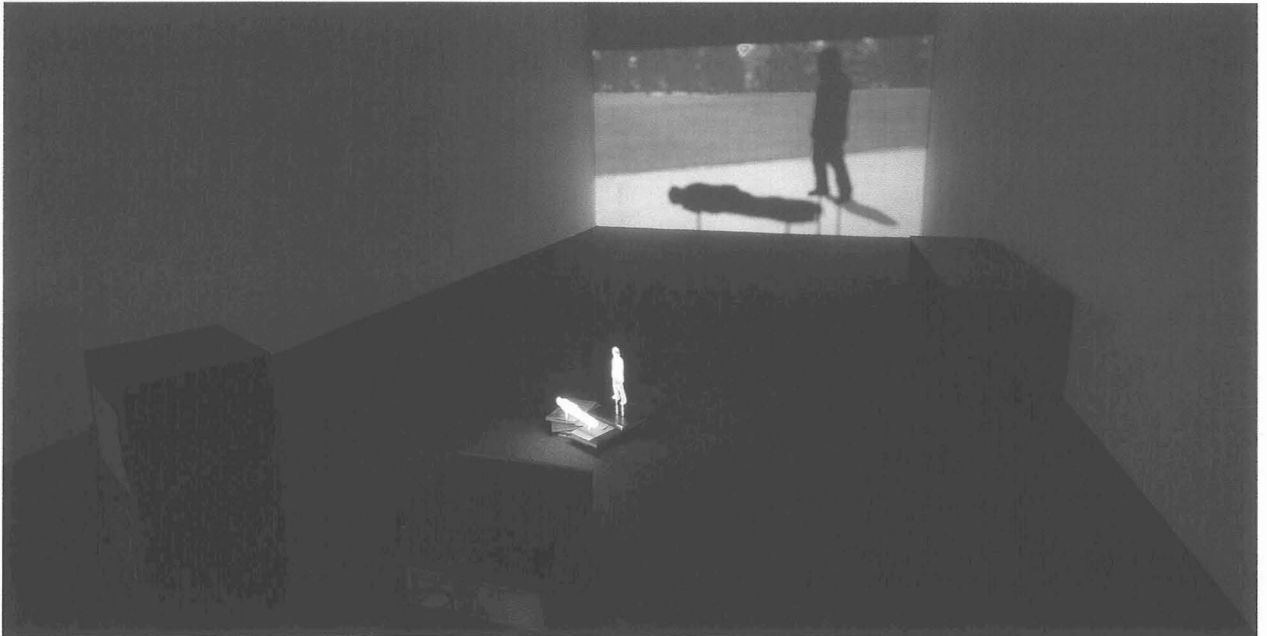
They are always on time. They tell no fictional stories, have no creation of myths, no concept of future events and no art. They see themselves as intrinsically different and better than other people around them. Above all, everything they do is to prevent them from being like anyone else, or being absorbed in the wider world. Women of Secta are recognizable by their smile. Their smile indicates the possession of a profound and unnameable knowledge. Men remain unrecognized usually. However, the majority of them do not belong to any gender.

They have their minds in sync with each other and in certain situations telepathic communications happen frequently. They do not believe that outsiders understand their language even after they have just carried on conversations with them. Secta is a secret brotherhood, an invisible network of the strong and ruthless who recognize no law, except their own will. Secta is a secret open-source community. Fluid. It enables the widest possible participation. It allows access by other sects. It is not transparent though. They do not have a hierarchical organization; there is a random, rhizomic growth....

They are happy. Forever and ever. Smiling endlessly, they could be recognized by the eternal sunshine in their eyes and kind of transparent glowing skin. One could find the little birthmark on the inner side of their thighs. Their individual desires are limitless and are not constrained by any external social forces.

They are frequently infiltrating major TV networks, setting up their own programs and broadcasting worldwide. The members of Secta do not know that they belong to it. They are always on time. They are sometimes established in the section of rare texts in the public library, where they would rape visitors. They are aware. They often radiate certain frequencies, which would occasionally overlap with and disturb the local radio programs.’

Excerpts from the soundtrack of the video *Secta*, 2006. The narrative was compiled from the found footage, my own texts and the contributions from the friends whom I had asked to describe one special feature of their favorite sect. ”



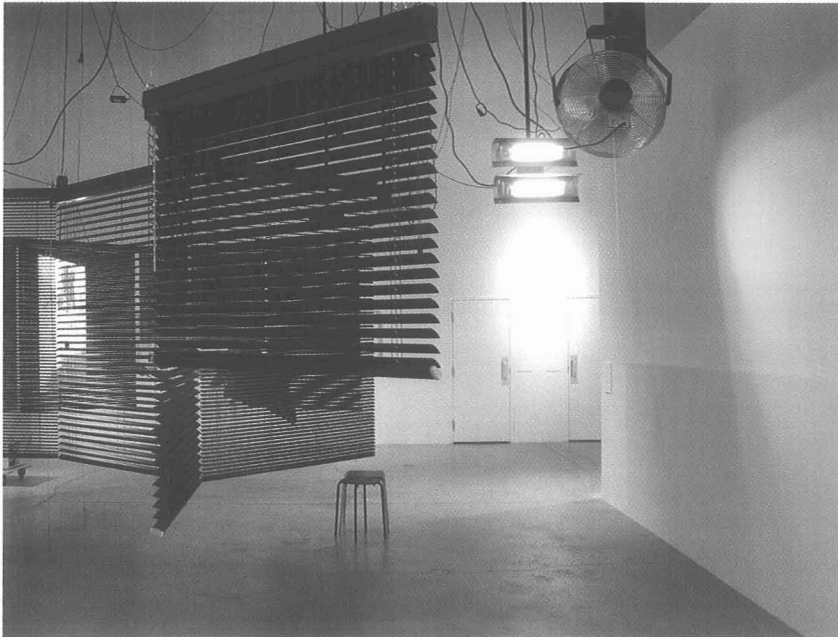
Gloomy Sunday, 2006, single-channel video installation with stereo sound, acrylic figures, vintage amplifier and speakers, books. Dimensions variable, 11:51 loop. Courtesy of Jessica Bradley Art + Projects, Toronto

Hadley+Maxwell:

“*Gloomy Sunday* (2006) takes the famous John Filo photograph of the Kent State student shootings as a subject to interrogate aesthetically. The aim is to pull apart the relation of figure and ground to reveal them as operative elements that function independently in a manner similar to the framework of an image in relation to its context. We perform the gestures of two figures from the photograph—the slain student and a helpless bystander—switching positions every few minutes. The resulting video document is projected onto two translucent acrylic figures that are based on the sum of our poses. Shadowy figures are cast on the screen, while reflections of our bodies are cast on two speakers. In each case, figures enter and exit forms, slipping between light and shadow, between the seen and remembered, the unseen and forgotten.

The soundtrack is our interpretation of a popular jazz standard, “Gloomy Sunday,” made famous by Billie Holiday, covered by numerous artists, but originally written in 1933 by Rezső Seress. On Holiday’s lyric, Hadley sings a slight variation—“was I only dreaming?”—set to Maxwell’s guitar, putting reality, fantasy, memory and revisionary history into suspension.

There is a hopefulness in this work at the level of how frozen images can be opened up through reworking or even emptying figures, displacing movements, and shifting grounds to form a place to be alongside one another (this is the ancient meaning of paradigm, to “show side by side”). It’s a tough but intimate economy, and it doesn’t have to be literally violent. Further to this question of violence is the accompanying question of justice, which manifests today in artworks that seek to legitimate their position politically by forcefully implicating “reality” into the making of the artwork. This force too often replicates, *even imitates*, what Agamben through Foucault termed a biopolitics—the immediate passage of the living human body into politics without a pause. If it is true that the human body has been entered into the political at a point beyond life and death as we know it, we need to find a figure, a *use* of images rather than a *production* of images, equivalent to the withdrawal of the insubstantial moment between life and death, self and other, People and people, decision and Rule.”



Domestics of Community—Version Toronto, 2008, details, black aluminium venetian blinds, scent dispensers, fan, freezer, water bottles, hot pad, infrared heater. Courtesy of Susanne Vielmetter, Los Angeles Projects. *Squandering Negative Spaces*, 2006, single-channel video, colour, sound, 29 min., filmed in Brazil. Courtesy of the Artist and Galerie Barbara Wien, Berlin

Haegue Yang:

“My installations unfold an associative field by coaxing various sensory experiences triggered by devices such as freezers, heating pads, humidifiers, fans or scent emitters. Using light, sound, wind, scent and movement arranged in a semi-transparent room bordered by venetian blinds, my installations allegorize and visualize a fluid discrepancy between the interior and exterior, and explore an alternative notion of community that isn’t bound by traditional limits.

The commission for “If We Can’t Get It Together” includes the last video essay of my trilogy (2004–2006) *Squandering Negative Spaces* (2006) in a newly conceived sensory field, equipped with infrared heater, hot pads, fan and scent emitters, combined with black venetian blinds. Venetian blinds provide a textural and spatial location for sensory experiences to inhabit. For instance, various scents, describing either biological process (nutrition and digestion) or environmental (climate or ethnic) conditions, are carefully located in the corners of the blind walls, yet they spread themselves beyond these borders. This sensory setting and semi-transparent space is accompanied by a video essay with a highly confessional narrative on subjectivity and its relation to community. In this presentation, I am trying to focus on the locality of community by quoting *Hometown* by Kim Beom, or by mentioning an abandoned house in Incheon, a symbol of squandered time. While a voice whispers with subtle yearning for a unique definition of lovers as negative space or shadow, the imagery of the video essay meanders through various urban settings in two Brazilian cities, yet they remain largely unrecognizable as specific cities.

The human condition under difficult circumstances creates an inevitable attachment among individuals to ethical and political change without direct negotiation or verbal agreement. Likewise, my camera and accompanying thoughts search for “a community of those who do not have a community,” or, a “community of absence” that is a “community of the plural that shares nothing but ongoing self-examination and a strange kind of optimism.” My work strives to address this particular form of community as one that is all around us.”