

# Complaining Communities: Complaints Choirs Worldwide

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Complaints Choir of Chicago, 2007. Photographed by author.

The concept of community in contemporary art is laden with complaints—complaints about how artists exploit or marginalize communities as they create community-based projects, complaints about how community is merely a buzzword within arts funding rhetoric, complaints about how the concept of community is too reductive or too utopian, complaints about how community has become useless as a theoretical construct. The difference between critique and complaint is a fine line, and certainly each of these points voices a valid issue for critical examination. To reduce these objections to mere complaints would be recklessly dismissive. However, at the same time, to ignore the role of complaint within critique also risks missing something valuable. Complaining is, in fact, a feature of community—it is a way of identifying with a group, a concept, a way of life. Through a discussion of Helsinki-based Finnish artist Tellervo Kalleinen and German artist Oliver Kochta-Kalleinen’s multi-versioned project *Complaints Choirs Worldwide*, this essay makes a case for the relevance of the complaint to questions of community and place-making in contemporary art. I approach this project not as exemplary, as a way to solve or resolve current dilemmas regarding the role of community in art, but as a case that raises provocative questions about current practices of collective engagement in art and the often uneasy recognitions that accompany efforts to locate alternative strategies and theories of community building.

Kalleinen and Kochta-Kalleinen organized the first *Complaints Choir* in 2005.<sup>1</sup> This project and their other collaborations (*Summit of Micronations/YKON*; *The Making of Utopia*; *I Love My Job*) foreground art as a forum for social interaction, experimentation and participation.<sup>2</sup> The premise of the work engages a touch of the absurd (get strangers to sing about life’s innumerable laments) and creates a temporary community through a common aesthetic task, transforming complaining into a series of creative actions in different cities (Birmingham, Helsinki, Hamburg, St. Petersburg, Chicago, Singapore). The artists use the format of the choir as an inclusive activity to encourage widespread participation from the various cities.<sup>3</sup> They also support a do-it-yourself program on their website (invite people to complain; find a willing musician; group the complaints; make the lyrics; write the song; rehearse; have a public performance; keep singing; make a video), encouraging everyone to organize their own choruses. Choirs regularly emerge in different places (Basel, Budapest, Jerusalem, Juneau) by virtue of the efforts of others. While the do-it-yourself approach generally captures the spirit of the event, the artist-organized choirs include a stronger mix of structure, direction and collaboration.<sup>4</sup> Using a “what happens if...” premise, these complaints choirs take an undesirable, everyday habit and turn it into a source of collective expression, a sanctioned and enjoyable event. This mix of fun and sharing social woes becomes a unique way of developing a bond among strangers.

The choir is by the artists’ description a “humorous project” with a lot of “warm self-irony,” but there is a limit, and the choir can be used in a “lazy way.”<sup>5</sup> For example, they have received offers to turn the concept into a reality television show, but they are certain the media would transform the concept into a funny joke—just singing about whining. In contrast, their method relies on a clear structure and participatory process. First, there is an open call for complaints and choir participants. This invitation to complain is generally distributed through websites and listservs, in the local weeklies, and on the radio. This call is usually facilitated by local contacts who have knowledge of the city’s media outlets. Next,

the artists group the submitted complaints into categories. At the first rehearsal, after some warm-up exercises and a group complaint session to generate more ideas, participants then organize into groups, with each group responsible for editing and choosing the specific complaints for each category. In Chicago, for example, the categories were as follows: traffic, other people, Chicagoland, family/friends/partners, service, products, work and education, and world issues. Those particularly interested in the lyrics usually work on fine-tuning the entire final text.

For the next rehearsal, and using the complaints as a guide, the composer comes to the choir with the basic structure of a song. Both the score and lyrics are adjusted as the choir practices and experiments with the song over the next few rehearsals. Participants are expected to attend all performances and rehearsals, and there is a tight rehearsal schedule in the weeks preceding the designated performance days (a number of performances are planned over the course of one weekend). In Chicago, the choir performed as part of the annual Chicago Humanities Festival, but Chicago as a destination initially emerged as a result of the efforts of the independent record label Smog Veil.<sup>6</sup> There were five rehearsals and almost fifty participants (one of the larger choirs, with Helsinki being the largest), and the weekend included: two performances at the Museum of Contemporary Art as part of the festival, a performance at a bar (The Empty Bottle), and three spontaneous street performances. Thus, the audience spanned from the intentional (ticketed event in gallery auditorium) to unintentional (people passing by; only one street performance was advertised). The performances are carefully documented, and the artists produce short videos of every choir.<sup>7</sup>

This is an undertaking that explicitly links each whinging chorus to a particular place—each incarnation is referred to as the Complaints Choir of a particular city. This is a collective project that spans across cities—there is an opportunity to participate in an international event—but one that it is rooted within a specific place.<sup>8</sup> The choirs, by virtue of the difference between cities, are distinct. The character of complaints varies from place to place, and by looking across the different cities, the complaints format allows for a unique comparative study of urban life, one that does not hold to rigid categorizations but takes the play and performance of complaining to make possible a distinct analysis of urban experience in different cities. For example, Chicago's complaints were obsessed with transit. Careless driving, insensitive commuting habits and unreliable public transit were the greatest source of everyday lament. While attention to traffic may be more pronounced in Chicago than in other places due to the particular culture and design of the city, the issue is also one of the most common and generic urban laments. Shadowing such complaints is the suggestion that cities are too crowded, too busy, too poorly designed to accommodate so many people. The second most common complaint in Chicago involved the indifference of others—the nature of service transactions (“The customer is always right/They always mess up my order”); the unsolicited opinions of others (“Childless people tell me how to raise my child”); irritating public habits (“Men wrap around the pole on the EL train like strippers”); and necessary but frustrating negotiations (“I hate my condo association”). Local knowledge also provides much of the texture to the songs, be it names of sports teams, abbreviations or other local references. While non-Chicagoans get the point of the reference (i.e. the fact that

the Cubs and Cardinals are sports teams is clear), there is still more to the local history that animates the complaints and humour for Chicago audiences and participants. Or, in some (relatively rare) instances the joke may well be lost on outsiders. The lyric, “My dead grandma always votes for the wrong candidate” might be puzzling without popular knowledge of Illinois’ (as well as other states’) struggle with voter registration scandals and charges of other electoral improprieties.

In general, of the different cities, the artists have observed that the complaints in Hamburg were “more serious” while in Helsinki they were more self-involved and “self-pitying.” In St. Petersburg, they were more existential and attuned to relationships and interactions, yet in the initial response from Chicago, there were more complaints about traffic (about 50 per cent) than anything else, and more complaints about other people, rather than oneself or relationships. Yet the character of difference is not just a matter of infinite yet relatively minor variations—in fact, complaining is also related to a certain level of comfort. Complaining in places with more strife and social and political unease might create, “a short piece of music.”<sup>9</sup> The image of a “short piece of music” reminds us that the energy and abundance of complaints can also be used to distinguish between privilege and necessity. The playful format and call for participation has limits, where the nature of the complaints also speaks to a great but unspoken level of comfort in many western cities, as well as access to cultural pursuits. While the artists endeavour to reach diverse participants and audiences, this is often one of the most challenging aspects of the project and depends on everything from the local organizer, who is sponsoring the project, as well as larger issues of social inclusion/exclusion and art’s audiences (which, of course, is related to issues of class, race and ethnicity, and the logic of cultural capital).<sup>10</sup> In Hamburg, for example, despite an active campaign that involved translating the call to reach out to the large and diverse immigrant community, the artists were confronted with a rather small and homogenous choir. Or, with Chicago, the artists recognized that more specific targeting of different populations would have been necessary to help increase the participation of urban minorities.<sup>11</sup> Certainly, the affiliation with Chicago’s Museum of Contemporary Art and the Humanities Festival linked the choir to official spaces of culture. But at the same time, the artists insist, the scale of the response or the constitution of the group cannot disappoint them. Instead, they maintain that, “everyone is the right person,” even while it is still important to acknowledge when participants do not represent the diversity of the city’s population. This acknowledgement becomes a way of troubling how to think of the work of participation within art’s community-building strategies.

### *Here and There: Art’s Circuits of Sociability*

This project is of a familiar type within current art practices that speaks to both internationalism and the global circulation of practices; artists develop a method that is translatable to different places, and the various incarnations are both the same and different. Artists become known for a particular type of project, but more accurately, they become known for a process of developing place-based, participatory forms of engagement.<sup>12</sup> The implications of such are various, and often move between scepticism and optimism. On the one side, it

can be argued that this translatability is a new example of art's commodification; artists have succumb to a branding instinct, and success is most assured if your "product"/practice is widely accessible and recognizable. Art, in this case, mimics global capitalism's homogenizing tendencies. On the other side, it can be argued the circulation of experimental practices is a way of disarming the capitalist ethos of the circulation of goods through a process that demands engagement rather than blind consumption. To make sweeping claims in the interest of either extreme is inadvisable,<sup>13</sup> but the interpretive dilemma remains nonetheless, and at centre stage is how to theorize the diverse principles and practices of engagement these local yet international projects depend upon. One route to such is to consider the significance of the temporary and the experimental to contemporary art's models of community building.

Experimental and temporary are important adjectives to the invocation of community in contemporary art.<sup>14</sup> Experimental, we are well reminded, is grounded in risk and uncertainty but the prospect of failure (however widely defined) is tempered by the pleasures of innovation and distinction. Experimentation is a principle much championed in the popular imagination, yet much maligned in practice. Temporary is not often considered to be much of a virtue; it connotes instability and precarity (a temporary job, a temporary dwelling) as well as finality—temporary acknowledges the certainty of the end from the very start. Thus, to think of community within contemporary art as something that is often experimental and temporary offers something important to any theory of community, as it highlights the significance of time (of temporality, of history) and the importance of practice—in this case, practices of experimentation as a way of orienting to collectivity. As such, experimental practice cannot rely on straightforward notions of identification. The complaint as a mode of bringing people together becomes a useful way to think about community as a relation within art.

Complaining contrasts the ideal types of sociability that we tend to value and emphasize when theorizing the virtues of participation and community. Complaining is generally treated as a nuisance, an undesirable characteristic. It tends to voice disagreement with the prevailing circumstances without a commitment to remedy. And yet, if we are attentive to the contradictory character of the complaint, we must recognize that complaining is also a way that people generate collective beliefs and desires. People voice complaints not only to express personal dissatisfaction, but also to search for agreement—complaining is a social form that tends to seek out agreement rather than tension or conflict (you complain to be agreed with, not to be proven wrong). There is a comfort in the shared lament. Complaining in this sense can be thought of as a widespread activity that is at once superficial as well as serious. It is a way of expressing experience that is also a call for recognition; complaining is a way to cultivate belonging and create community. As Kalleinen reminds, there is a communal aspect to complaining. It sounds individualistic, with people "full of their own complaints," but one dimension to complaining is that you are trying to reach someone else, to find affirmation and identification with another person. Put simply, "you hope the other person agrees," even though this seems to be a very negative way of connecting. Because of this tension between the individual and collective orientation of the complaint, complaining often charts contradiction, subtlety and open-endedness.



Complaints Choir of Chicago, 2007. Photographed by author.

Kochta-Kalleinen suggests that with the choir, “bigger issues are contained in the smaller complaints.” In general, world issues and explicitly political complaints tend to receive less attention—complaints about inequality and oppression do not tend to top the list. Further, the bluntness of the most controversial complaints will often be changed. For example, in an early draft of the Chicago lyrics, there is an explicit reference to then President G.W. Bush as a primate. This was changed to “We have a cowboy for president,” which is less of an insult, but a complaint that relies on more subtlety and interpretation. The general absence of social and political complaints could be used to support arguments for political distance and entitlement. However, if we accept complaining as a social practice that navigates the complexity of urban communities, positions and investments, the choir’s sentiments are much harder to trivialize. For example, with the Hamburg choir, complaints about having too much time are paired with complaints about not enough time. This duality acts as a commentary on the structure of time and particularly employment (which is an ongoing issue in the city), where people either feel undervalued and underemployed, or have unreasonably demanding jobs. Both conditions are a source of dissatisfaction. The complaint format holds both together, not with a direct critique of the system which produces such, but purely through the contradiction itself.<sup>15</sup>

And yet, the political stakes of reviving the vitality of complaining as an important social practice are higher than one might think. And this is starting to become more pronounced

lately, as more recent updates on the website indicate an increasing sense of the importance of complaining as a means of voicing resistance. For example, a group of complainers organized a choir that premiered at the annual July 1st pro-democracy demonstration in Hong Kong. In this case, the right to complain is clearly linked to the importance of civil rights, the right to protest and voice counter-opinions.<sup>16</sup> Similarly, both the artists and local organizers of the Chicago incarnation of the choir recognized the choir as an important response to restrictive platforms for social change, such as Rev. Will Bowen's *A Complaint Free World* (2007).<sup>17</sup> The Kansas City Reverend links personal happiness to collective happiness, arguing that it is necessary to change the individual foremost. He maintains that the contemporary world is laden with needless complaints and pessimism, but through the elimination of negativity within our lives, we are unquestionably on a path toward constructive social change. As the organization's website claims: "Your thoughts create your world and your words indicate your thoughts. When you eliminate complaining from your life will you enjoy happier relationships, better health and greater prosperity." Complaining is a scourge to be eliminated, and this eradication is the key to creating "a world of positive cooperation."<sup>18</sup> With its emphasis upon individual action and agency, this complaint-free agenda finds an easy place within the social arm of neo-liberalism and offers the ideal of cooperation without community. The choir, in contrast, uses the complaint to redeem a version of community created out of activity and social interaction. But in this version of community, we do not have untenable ideals so much as the contradictions and productive tensions that come out of a grounded participatory method.

### *Everybody is a Moron*

At the core of the complaint as a social practice is the simultaneous rejection and embrace of others. This becomes most clear through a chorus lyric from the Chicago choir that boldly declares, "Everybody is a Moron."<sup>19</sup> Truth, this is a rather uncomfortable sentiment. It isn't humorous, really. It is distinctly negative, and, it could easily be argued, inappropriate. The term can be used in jest (which already charts a fine line) but it is most often an insult, an insult with shameful scientific and social history.<sup>20</sup> While usually more tactfully stated, popular sentiment often reinforces this notion that community falters because people are, in essence, stupid.<sup>21</sup> The collective voicing of this point takes the sting out of the sentiment, which in one respect testifies to how a group can sanction ideas or actions that would be considered generally inappropriate. In this sense, the double-edge of collectivity is exposed, where things that aren't often explicitly stated, and yet still widely believed, are allowed to come to life through the collective yoke. This suggests something quite dark about the act of coming together: Everybody is a Moron, and this is how we think of each other. But the implications are still not entirely clear. Is everyone included in the barb? Am I a moron when I complain that everyone else is a moron? Or, does it only apply to others and not me, such that to declare everyone a moron makes for an exclusive "moron-free" zone, if you will, by virtue of the act of declaration? Does the act of rejecting others strengthen the immediate sense of community (often, in the most pernicious social and political examples, this is the case); or, is it rejection as well as self-abnegation that is required to cultivate belonging?

The complaints choir process is designed to encourage sociability and collectivity through humour and the realization of an unlikely scenario. But as the Chicago example illustrates, the voicing of group idiocy makes transparent the ambivalence innate to the participatory process that the complaints choir project initiates. The collective complaints format can let such a sentiment loose, maybe with a laugh, maybe without a thought, maybe with an uncomfortable pause. However, this is a moment when the surface and trivial character of the complaint, another key feature, might come as a relief. So we are all morons at a glance, but thanks to the work of coming together, the process of shared goals and attention, there could be a glimpse of something a little more substantial just below the surface—that is, if we are not too stupid to miss it altogether. So, while “everybody is a moron” might represent a moment when community falters, when collective goodwill fails, it might also be a good place from which to start discussions of community.



## ENDNOTES

1 With the support of the Springhill Institute, a small artist-run organization, the first Complaints Choir was organized in Birmingham with composer Mike Hurley in 2005.

2 YKON is an artist collective that includes Kalleinen, Kochta-Kalleinen, Petri Saarikko, Sasha Huber and Tomas Träskman that takes the concept and format of the micronation as a starting place for re-envisioning social networks and local interactions. The mandate reads as follows: “YKON is a non-profit advocacy group for unrepresented nations, experimental countries and utopian thinkers. The dissemination and production of knowledge on such fragile entities through co-operation between the arts and all other fields of study is a key interest of YKON. Group fusion, curiosity about utopian fantasy productions, and interest in the emergence and drying-up of alternative architectures of society unite its membership.” <<http://ykon.org/>>. *The Making of Utopia* is a project undertaken in Australia that invited four still-existing experimental, utopian communities to collectively create and act out a fictional film about themselves. *I love my Job* invited people from Göteborg, Sweden, to script a workplace scenario that realizes fantastic resolutions to everyday irritating and often nightmarish workplace realities. In consultation with the creators, select scripts were then acted out and filmed by professionals.

3 As Maria Lind’s essay in this volume points out, there is often much confusion between notions of collaboration, cooperation, collectivity, etc. I regard this project foremost as an example of participatory practice in contemporary art. For myself, the key distinction between a participatory and collaborative project is that collaboration includes shared authorial rights, which is not quite the case with this example, although the songs themselves represent a collaborative process. And certainly, both collaborative and participatory methods can represent ways of working through the formation of community in art.

4 And this essay will only concentrate upon the artist-organized examples, particularly Chicago, to ground the discussion.

5 All quotes from the artists unless otherwise noted are from an interview with the author on November 2, 2007 in Chicago.

6 Smog Veil is producing a record of the choir and working with the Danish production company Fine & Mellow on a feature-length documentary. The composer and pianist for the Chicago work was Jeremy Jacobson (aka the Lonesome Organist).

7 See <[www.complaintschoir.org](http://www.complaintschoir.org)> for the video archive of both artist and independently organized and uploaded examples.

8 During the question period after the first performance at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago, the nature and specificity of the complaints about Chicago was of most interest to the audience. With one exception, questions were not directed toward the artists. The audience was most interested in the choir’s relevance to the city, with questions about choice of lyrics and complaints about Chicago, the local details, and who of the choir was native to Chicago. One of the audience members seemed to suggest that being a Chicago native added legitimacy to the complaints and was a bit disappointed so few were born in Chicago (less than one third).

9 As Kochta-Kalleinen relates, “Somebody suggested to us to go to Kosovo, but our friend who lives in Prishtina told us that the concept wouldn’t work there: people have only one complaint; they want independence, everything else is of no concern. That would become a short piece of music” (2007:5).

10 Certainly, local contacts can in various ways direct who participates, as the postings for participation tend to spread more quickly within communities one is familiar with.

11 And while this is a reminder not to regard the complaints as absolutely representative, the absence of participation points to the often-exclusive nature of community building.

12 For example, to name but a few possibilities: Mark Dion’s architectural digs, Superflex’s Superchannel, Wochenklausur’s community facilitations, [mumur]’s collective oral histories.

13 And the opposition of which I speak is not just applicable to this situation, but speaks to an ongoing tension surrounding the ethics and practices of contemporary art—for example, it mirrors key aspects of the relational aesthetics debate (Bishop 2004; Downey 2007; Gillick 2006; Martin 2007; Ross 2006; Wright 2004). Certainly, the essays in the volume attest to current efforts to lend critical nuance to the polarity that has emerged.

14 See for example in this issue Basualdo and Laddaga's essay on "Experimental Communities." And, of course, Miwon Kwon's categorization of models for community oriented site-specific practice (mythic community, sited community and invented/temporary community 118-137), defines invented community as temporary formations—the community that the art project creates through its realization. Miwon Kwon, *One Place After Another: Site Specificity and Locational Identity* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2002).

15 And in this sense, there is an important difference between complaint and protest. The artists believe it is important not to present the project as a "protest choir," as this would change the character and dynamic of sociability and risk becoming more exclusionary and less thought-provoking, in addition to causing more internal tension (interview). But this, I would argue, does not preclude a stronger political orientation of different choirs at times (see below).

16 According to an AFP article by Edith Tsang, "Sing when you are moaning: Hong Kong Complaints Choir," July 7 2009, the choir's website was hacked and blocked by a disgruntled hacker from mainland China (which does not enjoy the same freedoms as the city-state of Hong Kong) with the comment "silence is golden." See the complaints website for video footage of the choir. This choir is rare in that the lyrics clearly voice a desire for social and political change, and a larger analysis of both artist and independently organized efforts that further take into account differing contexts would add further insight to some of the issues of comparison only touched upon in this essay.

17 The complaint-free mandate is its own industry, with a book, website and store all designed to assist in a campaign to create complaint-free churches, schools and other organizations. A ten lesson curriculum for elementary and high school students is available for teachers to download for free.

18 See <<http://www.acomplaintfreeworld.org/faqs.html#stop>>.

19 Thanks to Simon Critchley for suggesting that I develop the implications of this complaint.

20 As once a medically acceptable label and category of intellectual disability that came into popular usage to refer to stupidity, this is a word that has a history of maintaining scientific and social prejudice. Its origin derives from the Greek *moros*, "foolish."

21 Usually defined in a context specific sense, but generally, the lament is that other people don't agree, and it is incomprehensible that they could not agree (so they must be "stupid").