The Coming Community

In Search of Community in Contemporary Art

The title of the exhibition "The Coming Community" is borrowed from the title of Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben's book, which centers on an imagined future of Western society. [1]In contrast to other thinkers, who have presented the enslavement of contemporary society to systems of representation and simulation as a problem, Agamben argues that within the total assimilation of life into a world of imagery and language that have lost their meaning, one may envision the emergence of a new possibility. [2]His book describes a gathering of human beings that is not shaped by political, social or ideological beliefs – a society whose shared language has been emptied of meaning, and which is no longer defined by a unique identity. In lieu of shared beliefs, the members of this community are united by a sense of unconditional belonging based on the essence of human existence. This optimistic tone resonates, albeit somewhat less strongly, in the works featured in this exhibition, which examine communities and communal gatherings centered on a shared experience of human camaraderie and on the comfort it provides.

Sociology defines human beings as social creatures, and the need to belong is thus perceived as a basic human need. The definition of the term "community," meanwhile, changes according to the context in which it is made. A community is perceived as a dynamic form of organization that is subject to constant change, and which develops through the reciprocal relations among its members and between

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

[2] Agamben's writing builds both on the writing of Walter Benjamin, and especially on "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," and on Guy Debord's influential book *The Society of the Spectacle*.

them and the surrounding society. The basis for the creation of a community – which may be ideological, religious, professional, cultural, historical or other – is related to the construction of a shared identity through the creation of unique symbols: a particular slang or jargon, a way of dress, rituals, symbols, norms and behavioral patterns. [3]

In contrast to earlier thinkers, Jean-Luc Nancy argues that communities are not formed around notions of fusion or production, but rather on the need to confront an imminent threat – a threat that Nancy defines as death itself. [4]Social organization is a basic aspect of human behavior inherent to all human beings. It is based on a need not only to create support systems that may be of use during times of crisis, but also on the desire to create repositories of social memory capable of transcending the life span of individual human beings. Through the enactment of various ceremonies and shared narratives, collective memory ensures that the essence of human life survives following the demise of physical body.

We currently live in an age of uncertainty. The recent financial crisis and collapse of stock markets worldwide significantly contributed to undermining the basic assumptions that form the basis of Western society. The immediate sense of distress that followed upon this crisis, moreover, has brought to the surface political and social concerns that question our perception of society. The values associated with capitalism, whose ideological basis is the longing for constant growth in the spheres of both production and consumption, are currently put into doubt – a process that is also related to the world's growing ecological crisis. In this context, one may

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[3] Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (New York: Verso, 1991); Kelly Owen, *Community, Art and the State: Storming the Citadels* (London: Comedia Publishing Group in association with Marion Boyars, 1984).

[4] Jean-Luc Nancy,*The Inoperative Community* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991).

note a growing tendency, on the part of various social groups, to create an identity that is distinct from that of the collective at large, and to shape their own local or goal-oriented narrative. From Nancy's perspective, such an inclination is both natural and clearly understandable, given the crisis of trust that has come to characterize relations between nations and their governments, as well as between various groups and their leaders. The narrative shared by each of these communities enables them to resist the dictates of society at large, and to create an escape route out of a reality in which the individual has limited control over his lifestyle and capital.

In the present age, the formation of communities takes place with relative facility and in a different manner than in the past. Several scholars have recently examined the ways in which digital communications and the Internet play a central role in shaping the formation of social groups.[5] In contrast to accepted historical models, such groups are not structured in a hierarchical manner; rather, they are based on social networks composed of alternative centers. The pyramidal structure of earlier social formations is thus replaced by a rhizomatic structure, with no top or bottom. [6] In this manner, the information revolution has contributed to the prevalent cultural tendency to form small groups whose narrative is unique, specific and detached from any one geographical context.

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[5] Manuel Castells (ed.), *The Network Society: A Cross Cultural Perspective* (Glos,
UK: Edward Elgar Publishing Ltd., 2004).
[6] In their book *A Thousand Plateaus*, the philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari discuss the concept of the rhizome, which refers to natural systems devoid of hierarchical relations. The rhizome is a botanical model that describes the growth of roots in certain plants, such as grass. The roots of such plants do not grow in a linear manner, but rather spread out equally across a given terrain, and all parts of the plant are similarly capable of perpetuating this growth process. This process is metaphorically used in other theoretical texts to metaphorically describe social and other systems that do not evolve in a linear or hierarchical manner.

These tendencies and phenomena, may explain the growing interest of both critics and artists in the formation of various communities whose members embrace alternative narratives.

The artists participating in this exhibition study and document a range of such communities, construct representations of them, and actively intervene in them. They raise questions concerning the ways in which shared narratives – formed either intentionally or by chance – give rise to the existence of various communities and shape the identity of their individual members. The need to assemble together and to make contact with others through a shared narrative, whether based on a collective history, a certain life style or an artificial construction, is clearly reflected in these works. In this manner, they examine different ways of coping with life in postmodern Western society, which is saturated with representations, simulations, and imitations of various social narratives.

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Writing about the significant shift that is currently taking place in contemporary art, the curator and critical thinker Nicolas Bourriaud underscores the importance of the human dimension as the basis for exploring artistic and theoretical concerns. [7] According to Bourriaud, art has turned to producing meaning through its reciprocal relations with the other – an ongoing process that vies with, and at times also replaces, pre-structured art objects. For artists working in this manner, the audience is not imagined as a group of separate individuals, but rather as a community, even if only a temporary or a utopian one. These artists examine the limits of their role and their own social definition, while their work intersects with other fields of knowledge that are not traditionally identified with art, such as ethnography,

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[7] Nicolas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics* (Paris: Les Presses du Réel, 1998).

sociology, and politics. Suzi Gablik, among other thinkers, takes a positive view of artists engaged with these concerns, and describes them as individuals capable of detaching themselves from the attention economy typical of the art world, and of moving beyond its limits.[8] According to Gablik, such practices fulfill the avant-garde role of art: that is, they resist social conventions that blur the limits between art object and commercial consumer objects.

At the same time, numerous thinkers and writers critically approach this same phenomenon, and raise ethical questions concerning the meaning of such actions. The art historian Hal Foster, for instance, has addressed the blurring of boundaries between art and other professions. [9]In his essay "The Artist as Ethnographer," Foster specifically discusses artists who assume an ethnographic role while intervening in marginal communities and societies, and subsequently presenting related documentary or pseudo-documentary materials. Foster discusses what he describes as an instrumentalization of art, which creates a political, unilateral narrative. Moreover, he sheds light on the problematic depiction of the "other" as an exotic and at times inferior object, whose examination satisfies a voyeuristic urge and perpetuates the hegemony of a condescending Western gaze.

The exhibition "The Coming Community" examines these conflicts as they are addressed in the works of artists active within a range of different communities, with the goal of documenting the activity of these communities or actively intervening in them. These artists confront the ethical questions related to their work, and shed light on the process of representing and constructing an image of the other while studying communities whose unique narratives may at times appear strange or eccentric.

The French duo **Alain Della Negra and Kaori Kinoshita** study and document such marginal communities, and examine the construction of their unifying

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[8] Suzi Gablik, *The Reencahntment of Art* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1992).
[9] Hal Foster, "The Artist as Ethnographer," *The Return of The Real: Art Theory At the End of the Century* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1996).

narrative by representing the personal journey undertaken by each of their members. **Netta Lieber Sheffer's** paintings examine the moments in which various groups – such as soldiers, workers in a field, or students – are formed. These paintings are shaped by a subjective gaze, and examine the experience and the foundational moments that structure the formation of a collective identity. **Sharon Lifschitz** casts a gaze that is both sensitive and critical on the narrative that shaped life in the kibbutz where she grew up, and studies it through the memories embedded in photographs. In doing so, she reveals the points at which the line between individual identity and memory and the community's collective memory are blurred.

Angelika Sher's photographs center on the customs, aesthetic conventions and patriarchal structure of the Russian immigrant community in Israel – a community that has largely resisted assimilation into Israeli society.

Some of the participating artists occupy a critical stance and didactically examine the construction of shared narratives and the roles they play, in an attempt to expose the building blocks of a collective identity. **Rod Dickinson**'s installation exposes the rhetorical tools employed in order to shape moments of unity and political camaraderie. His re-reading of speeches made in different places during different historical moments reveals an unlikely combination of statements, which amount to a series of vague declarations. Such a critical approach is also evident in the work of **Tamir Tzadok**, which examines the construction of cultural identity and undermines the perception of history as a narrative based on scientific facts.

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In May 2010, in celebration of its decennial anniversary, the Tate Modern in London hosted an art festival titled "No Souls for Sale." The Turbine Hall at the entrance to the museum was divided up by a grid, and each individual cell was given over to an artist or group of artists whose works are directly related to social concerns. The focus of this festival reflected the tension between the museum tradition, which is based on the assumption that art is inherently related to the

presentation of objects in a circumscribed space, and between types of contemporary artmaking that undermine the status of the art object. This event clearly marked the repositioning of activist art groups at the center of artistic discourse, and underscored the significance of their artistic strategies.

The current exhibition features the works of artists who actively intervene in the social sphere, and tend to represent scenes that capture new community-based narratives. The Haifa-based group **Block**, for instance, has created a space for public gatherings around on a fountain located inside the museum space. The fountain, a prominent architectural element in the local landscape, blurs the boundaries between interior and exterior, and calls for social gatherings and for a nostalgic gaze upon what was once a central feature of urban life. **Ilan Spira** examines the sub-culture of foreign workers in the south of Tel Aviv by taking an active part in their community life. The significance of his concern with this community has been underscored by the Israeli government's recent decision to deport many of the children of foreign workers and their families. The Chinese artist Cao Fei intervenes in the online world by participating in the game "Second Life," which has given rise to the formation of a virtual community. Her installations underscore the connection between real life and this alterative, virtual life, while revealing the mechanisms of political power that shape both worlds.

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Some of the artists participating in the exhibition investigate the power of shared narratives as a catalyst for the formation of various communities. These artists examine the essence of the term "community," as well as its limits, by means of invented narratives or rituals.

Assi Meshulam's work presents a system of religious belief that does not include a god. This system is characterized by distinct philosophical and visual traits,

and is designed to fit the needs of contemporary individuals. **Brody Condon** combines multi-player fantasy role games with performance art to create a seemingly isolated world, in which individuals invent and develop communal narratives and rituals. In this manner, the work undermines the distinction between fantasy and reality, and examines the formation of a community-based narrative. **Orit Ben-Shitrit**'s video work features a group that speaks an imagined language. Each of the figures in this work functions within a narrative shaped by a mythical struggle between the figure of the narrator and an invisible force. The group of men in the drawings created by **Vik Jacobson Frid** exist in a liminal state that appears impossible to escape from. The narrative woven in this context is not a linear one, but rather one based on fragments of time, place and history. **Elad Kopler**'s paintings give rise to a fictional, post-apocalyptic world in which objects and cultural symbols replace the experience of actual presence and social identity. **Eli Gur Arie**'s works are concerned with the ecological crisis and with imaginary, artificial alternatives for preserving nature. In this perishable world, it is no longer possible to distinguish the real from the imaginary.

Through the concern with real and imagined communities, this group of works calls attention to the paradigms that shape our identification with a given social structure – based either on a critical stance vis-à-vis the existing reality or on a search for an alternative one.

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In conclusion, it is worth noting that the current concern with community is rooted in a long and complex discourse throughout the history of art. In this sense, art has always been related to the political and the social, and to some extent, has also been dependent on them. The roots of the preoccupation with art that is only partially object-based began in the 1920s, with the rise of Dada and Surrealism. It continued with body and performance art, conceptual art, the Situationists

International, feminist art, and other related forms of artmaking. Over the past decade, artists have expressed a renewed interest in these artistic strategies and in their various implications. In light if this renewed focus on these practices, the work of curators, art historians, and critics is similarly being redefined, as they are required to shift their interest from aesthetics to an in-depth examination of ethical concerns. [10]Based on the deep affinity between these two terms, this exhibition attempts to tread the thin line that both connects and separates the realms of ethics and aesthetics.

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[10]   Anthony Downey, "An Ethics of Engagement: Collaborative Art Practices and the Return of the Ethnographer," *Third Text*, vol. 23, issue 5, September 2009, pp. 593-603.