

Bojana Kunst

Each Other: Dis/Apearances of the Collaborative Other

1. Ghosts

Guy Debord was, beside his visionary critique of spectacular society and his notorious drunkenness, also famous for his ruthless exclusion of even his closest friends and collaborators from the Situationist movement. The whole history of the movement can be read as a series of exclusions and rejections of many important collaborators. This is also one of the main reasons for the regular renaming of the movement since it enabled the movement to differentiate itself from the disappeared former collaborators. One of the common ways that Debord cut off former collaborators was by publicly announcing their inappropriate character and even publishing their obituary, as happened in the case of Gil Wolman, which was published in *Potlach* in 1957: «Wolman had an important role in the organisation of the Lettriste Left-wing in 1952, then in the foundation of LI. Author of 'megapneumatic' poems, a theory of 'cinematochronicity' and a film, he was a Lettriste delegate at the congress of Alba in September 1956. He was 27 years old.»¹

Ironically, no other form than the obituary can better disclose the main flow of time, which was significant for many collaborative artistic movements in the twentieth century. This flow of time was particularly characteristic of the political and artistic avant-garde movements aimed at future revolutionary goals as the vanguards of history. The obituary for the excluded member of the movement is not a sign that the avant-garde and revolutionary flow of time is progressive and therefore ruthless to all who do not follow the timeline of the most vanguard community of collaborators. It is much more interesting to disclose how such a timeline is deeply ambivalent and splits avant-garde artistic communities that seem to be collectively attuned to a future society. As Susan Buck-Morrs writes, it is a kind of schizophrenic temporality, or simultaneous temporality, where the revolutionary time that still has to come exists parallel to the present time, which at the same time has to be active as never before (if we don't want the future project or revolution to fail). Buck-Morrs is writing about simultaneous temporality when analyzing the time structure of the revolutionary state, which is always divided into the time of the revolution and the time of the regime.² But this simultaneous time structure can also be implemented on a smaller scale in the collaborative structure of (artistic) communities oriented towards finality: the future can

be the goal only when the present time is fully activated in its collaborative agency – alliances, collaborations, working together, being with each other. Nevertheless – and here we come to the schizophrenic character: the future is only possible when the present time is at the same moment sacrificed, when the alliances of the community are continuously erased. On the one hand there is the huge amount of time which still has to come, and on the other the time of present events, defined by processes like friendships, alliances, love, co-working, collaboration, being together. As was, for example, a small event in the Italian mountains, when several Situationists and Lettriste friends and sympathisers came together in a small village to proudly perform the First World Congress of Free Artists, a clear announcement of the time which was still to come. Even if the food was good and the weather in the mountains fine, the closest collaborators stayed together only as kinds of ghosts. The communities oriented towards the common future goal are namely not based so much on the erasure of subjectivity in a collective sameness as on a certain spectralisation of even the closest other: where other is always present already as a ghost, no matter how strong his present agency is. Under the heavy burden of radical choice (a paradoxical choice where there is no choice possible), ghosts fall into the ungraspable gap between future and present.

The artistic history of the twentieth century is known for many collective achievements, which on the one hand constantly and publicly disclosed collaborators as expelled others and ghostly heretics in the name of the future common goal, and on the other, constantly sought out alliances and friendships, which also aesthetically reconfigured artistic production. Nevertheless, too many ghosts and too many failures contributed to the fact that today communities with collective ideals are ridiculed and generally there is a lot of disappointment with the idea of community. But is it possible for a community to nevertheless exist and not fall into such a double time structure where the other is near only as a spectral ghost, and paradoxically also as a mirror? However, people tend to work with each other, they want to be together and share work together, but what is it, then, that holds them together? The French philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy offers us a way to bring back the corrupted notion of community by shifting the notion of community as finality to the ordinary being together. «Community on the contrary is ordinary being together, without any assumption of common identity,

without any strong intensity, but exposed to banality, to the 'common' of existence.»³ It is not, then, the depiction of the common dominated by finality, which can take different forms (total man, society without classes, liberated body, liberated subjectivity, etc.). Neither is the common that which is tightly intertwined with the active transformation of twentieth century history, but merely ordinary being together, deprived of all historical tasks. If we follow Nancy, this would not be the common of the future, but the 'common' of 'always already', this that we already share in relation to our banal and daily life (like the question of our own finitude, for example), the 'sacred profane' which arranges us together, something that is already always there. This is then the community, where there is no exchange, no universality, no economy, no coherence, no identity, because, at the same time, nothing can be shared; there is no being of togetherness, or to put it differently: the community is made from the retreat of the common. «The retreat opens and continues to keep open, this strange being-the-one-with-the-other to which we are exposed.»⁴

II. Bodies

In 1967, actors and members of the Living Theatre invited their audience to protest and join in a common act of bodily and sexual liberation on the stage. *Paradise Now* was the title of the famous performance, which not only revealed the re-awakening of the ritualistic character of 1960s art, but can also reveal a different notion of community and its collaborative structure. The performance happened in a period with huge political disappointments over political and personal situations and a strong need for liberation and exploration of new ways of being together. One disobedient sentence from the performance can precisely describe what was at the core of these explorations: 'I'm not allowed to take my clothes off. I'm outside the gates of paradise.' *Paradise Now*, as the title precisely formulates, was the way how personal, intimate and sexual desires could be liberated. New communities can be built as communities of equals, friends, brothers, sisters and lovers, which can all be together in the present time of sensation and pleasure, in the present time of aesthetic reorientation of perception and sensuality. That's also why members of the audience were invited to join the scene on the spot and to explore and

search together with the members of the theatre group for ways of liberation and also – what is very important – for ways to do art. Nobody was excluded in advance, everybody was welcomed as being capable of collaborating and doing it (doing art, of course). The 60s communities are without doubt very different from the avant-garde collectives with their ghostly characters. One of the biggest differences can be found in the collaborative structure, which no longer fell into the split of ambivalent time structure, but disclosed the power of the present time in its endless agency. Or as Alan Kaprow demands when writing about the new art of happening: «All our senses have to be alert, only then the artistic situations can unfold themselves as naturally as the wind ruffles the tree leaves and something can transpire that is as ubiquitous as walking down a street.» But to hold on to the present all the time, to have one's senses alert all the time and to disclose desires, the community somehow became much more embodied in its collaborative manner; collaboration became more bodily and fleshy, as it were. Here we have a different notion of community, where bodies are collaborating with each other, where alliances are made between libidinal energies, where being together is grounded in desire. Desires and energies, orifices and fluids, sensations and sensualities. With the democratisation of the community the collaborative other appeared as a body, as, for example, the desiring bodies of *Paradise Now* or the close together bodies of Marina Abramovic and Ulay in *Breathing In/Breathing Out* (1977). With these bodies together it was thought that time and space could be aesthetically reconfigured in such a way that freedom and liberation would be possible for every particular and intimate particle of community.

The collaborative structure of the 60s communities is therefore very different from the collaboration of ghosts, who fell into the gap of history under the heavy burden of radical choice. The flow of bodies and liberated senses is namely possible only if they are at the same time present as differentiated particularities and individuals, only as differences of desires and investments. The collaboration here happens under the light burden of endless choices, which also underlies the exploration of liberation in *Paradise Now*: 'all creative actions form out of some kind of freedom, nothing bearable happens without some kind of freedom.' The collaborative other is present only through an immediate freedom of choice and it is precisely through this freedom of choice that the individual acquires his/her body, his/her senses, his/her very

particular desires and creative energies. But there is also a strange paradox at work, which can be very interestingly observed in the practice of contact improvisation which emerged during the 60s period: movement is developed through the freedom of the body to improvise and choose depending on moving bodies in close contact, but how is it then that the performance we see at the end is more or less always the same? The endless participatory freedom of bodily collaborators, the spontaneity of the democratic communities from that period, is only possible through a series of strict protocols that, exactly because they are merely technical, enable a 'free' scenario for collaboration. Participatory freedom is thus always the freedom of realisation through a certain protocol, which in turn allows us to participate and do whatever we desire without interruption. As we know very well today, in the 60s, the forms of power were not eradicated, they rather underwent a fundamental change; power inhabited the networks, modes of collaboration, protocols of the private, the flows of the corporeal, microstructures of intimacy. *to connect* The paradox at the core of participatory freedom is therefore the fact that every form of participatory freedom requires the same scenario for the body to be free. And this is exactly what is the problem when the closest other is the body: bodies participate and are free only inside the already given scenarios for different others, inside already given scenarios for free desires. This paradox of the 60s communities is today at the core of the contemporary production of desire, where scenarios for freedom are increasingly unified, privatised and controlled. Consequently the other is also increasingly represented and produced under already given scenarios: paradise now is a world of prêt-à-porter identities, bodily styles, glorified differences in the desiring unity of the present time.

III. Each Other's

«We can only speak in the first person. We are neither interpreters nor spokeswomen of each other's practices and actions. We do not speak in the name of one another because I am 'the other' when I express what I believe in and feel, within a scenario that was never given or borrowed.»⁵ These words from Maria Galindo, artist, feminist and activist from Bolivia, can reveal some important dis/appearances of the collaborative other from the perspective of

today, especially because there seems to be a strong need to think about the community again, despite all the previous disappointments. The need to speak in the first person is extremely significant, since with first person speech the destiny of becoming a ghost can be avoided. With this performative gesture of singularity we can avoid constantly speaking for the other and, simultaneously, being constantly spoken about. But at the same time this need of speaking in the first person has nothing to do with the freedom of choice to speak for myself, or better: with the possibility to embody my particular self in the already given scenario for freedom. Galindo is clear on this point: «I'm the other when I express what I believe and feel.» When she speaks, she already discloses «this strange being-the-one-with-the-other to which we are exposed»⁶ about which Jean-Luc Nancy talks when describing the community of ordinary being together. What is happening here is the continuous rearticulation of time and space when speaking. Using the language of the singular she makes the common appearance explicit: at the moment we speak explicitly, we are the other and the connection between meaning, place and time becomes visible.

Community then has little to do with the future common goal, but neither with being selfless, sharing, taking responsibility for one's actions or respecting the other. Furthermore, community has nothing to do with the consensus for collaboration, with pluralistic procedures for democratic dissemination. It is not an outcome of the distribution of a shared, democratically disseminated and proportionally allocated property. What is it then that the community is about? Maybe it is a movement of swarms, a flow of singularities, a constant rearticulation of space and time with speech and movement. Alliances, friendships and collaborations are neither the movements of ghosts nor the energetic flows of bodies, but rather a result of dispossessing knowledge, imagination and affects. A community is then paradoxically a constant dispossession of collaboration and its possibilities. It is a structure in space and time, where the others are together as swarms. Community can be similarly rearranged, as Maria Galindo writes: «We place ourselves next to one another, back to back, one in front of the other, according to the necessities of each specific struggle.»

This will probably be quite a strange book, then, where everybody will speak in a first person, while at the same time placing himself, or herself, close to each other.

1. Simon Ford, *The Situationist International: A User's Guide*. London: Black Dog Publishing, 2005, p. 42.
2. Susan Buck-Morris, *Dreamworld and Catastrophe, The Passing of Mass Utopia in East and West*. Cambridge, Mass./London: The MIT Press, 2002.
3. Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*. Edited by Peter Connor. Minneapolis/London: University of Minnesota Press, 2004, p. XIII.
4. Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*, p. XXXIX.
5. Maria Galindo: 'No matter how much you love me, I do not want to belong to you,'
http://www.republicart.net/disc/publicum/galindoo1_en.htm
6. Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*, p. XXXIX.