



I guess I must admit it right at the beginning: Few topics seem as exhausted, worn out and even irritating to me as “collectives and communities”. When confronted with texts and projects about this topic, I feel an urge to drop them and redirect my attention before it’s too late, the tension is almost equal to when in church the tone of the preacher’s voice during the first words gives away the gist of the sermon after just a few seconds.

So, this is maybe why I accepted *Artalk*’s offer to prepare a selection of texts on collectives and communities. Despite being nothing new, the community turn can’t be overlooked. For several years, it has been circulating intensely in art and cultural production as a universal remedy to the individualism-centered capitalistic pressure putting cooperation against the market’s competitiveness and emphasizing sharing and unconditional togetherness instead of productivity, the ability of self-regeneration instead of endless growth, an organic bottom-up instead of a grid-centralist top-down approach. It experiments with forms of non-hierarchical structures. It should all click, but, for some reason, it doesn’t. The text selection for *Artalk Revue 6* is an attempt to put into words, even for myself, what annoys me on the community turn in art so much and why, even though I share, to a large extent, its starting points.

Today, the community and collective turn is probably most often referred to in attempts to introduce the shared commons into practice and also in an effort to think and design more-than-human alliances. In a time of extreme concentration of wealth and of social inequalities („There

are billions of users and one billionaire,” writes Jodi Dean in her essay *Society doesn't exist*) on the one side and a looming environmental collapse on the other side, this seems to be the most logical reaction. My critical suspicion is that community projects get all too often locked in an endless loop so establishing relationships becomes their goal. Under what conditions can community and collective building become a political and not just a therapeutic tool?

It is probably given by my anthropological background, but projects, which in some way put collectiveness “on display” (from developers’ PR projects to esoteric eco-communities), remind me persistently in some respects of 19th century’s human zoos. The early capitalist society, exhausted by advancing industrialization and its mechanical repetitiveness, created an image of lost authenticity projecting it into the people of colonized countries which paid the price for “progress” by being exploited and plundered. Those “noble savages” were then displayed as an attraction at fairs, shows, and world exhibitions. As a relic of something irretrievably disappearing and fascinating but irrelevant. Aren’t we, in “displaying” collectiveness and community or the ability to establish a relationship, currently doing something similar? Especially when this is happening in projects limited by one-year grant schemes whose implementation depends on hours of unpaid work, personal and professional excessive pressure, and periodical burnouts. When striving to create more than art and design different, better worlds, we often exhaust ourselves and our personal relationships with our loved ones and end up realizing we need to make our living from something.

And there is also another aspect. The people of colonized countries in those stylized scenes in human zoos were not supposed to represent a radical alternative – in fact, they were just representing living proof of Western hegemony. And above all, those staged lost paradises were sending out a message that they had been irreversibly lost and tamed, they were not representing a threatening different world which could prevail at any time. I am afraid that community projects that invest all their effort and means into portraying the fact that other worlds are still possible, without focusing on the structural reasons of why we can’t, don’t want to and don’t know how to establish relationships and alliances naturally, are rather a musefied, harmless staging of alterity than a potential alternative. Under what conditions the former turns into the latter so that new imaginations lead to utopias instead of escapism? Community art practice alone does not offer an answer to this question.

Especially when communities are romanticized and venerated in the grant language as a sacred, untouchable concept. Thus, they become not only an analogy of missionary work and moralizing about “good examples”, but, above all, of boredom. Communities and collectives unavoidably include conflicts, tension, frustrations, ego trips and organizational incompetence masked behind horizontality and openness. But this is often their most interesting aspect. By suppressing it we reproduce a false flawless, unachievable image we can cling on to while considering the contact with real community representatives, such as our apartment house neighbors or close family, unbearable.

In her essay *Walled States, Waning Sovereignty*, Wendy Brown, an American political scientist, considers separation walls the ultimate manifestation of the decline of state sovereignty. Only those states that are feeling insecure, weak, and threatened need to ostentatiously declare their power by means of security walls. Walls are the materialization and performance of the states’ melancholy for their lost sovereignty. The current fascination with communities and collectives may be, first and foremost, the performance and re-update of our melancholy for lost cohesion.

The texts collected in *Artalk Revue 6* question whether such an ideal state has ever existed while coming up with a reoriented focus: They look into the forms and mechanisms

of cohesion between groups that go beyond the stereotype of „good examples“ and artistic practice. Their perspective extends to social sciences: Kristína Országhová writes about sports communities acting as both a refuge and a battlefield and as a tool of reproduction of class and gender differences but also of their possible subversion. Ondřej Slačálek focuses on the mutual dynamics between the Czech neo-Nazi and antifascist scenes in the 90s and describes the ideological, communication and aesthetic constellations they were creating within one shared battlefield. The visual essay RUVK (Realist Utopia Velký Krtíš) is a report on the inhabitants of a socially excluded house who have not chosen this identity but are forced to deal with its stigma on a daily basis. In this house, the romantic idea of more-than-human alliances is directly confronted with the necessity to share one's private living space with cockroaches and true bugs.

Elisabeth Schimpfössl's translated text is linked to the opposite pole of the social spectrum and analyzes philanthrocapitalism as a tool of class reproduction of the Russian super-rich. It points out that they use philanthropic activities both to legitimize their status and disproportionate wealth and also as a trick allowing them to create a continuity between seemingly unconnectable opposites: totalitarian socialism, in which they grew up, and capitalism, in which they became rich. In the second translated text, Jodi Dean analyzes three claims for the non-existence of society applying them on the world of social media. She sees them as an example of collective production which collides with the absence of collective ownership frameworks and thus leads to extreme accumulation of individual profits. She suggests we reorient our focus from the questions of content decentralization and circulation to ownership relations in the world of social media.

The selection of five texts for *Artalk Revue* cannot be exhaustive. But maybe it will manage to suggest that communities, collectives, and societies can, instead of being a spectacular-melancholic showcase of “what connects us”, form precisely from the other side: From realizing that we all must live off something and somewhere. Collective practice can then be about finding ways to transform this limitation into a starting point.

English translation: Anna Žilková

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