‘After-War’: Kristina Norman and the negotiation of post-communist community

Harry Weeks, The University of Edinburgh

Two influential texts on the subject of community, Roberto Esposito’s *Communitas: The Origin and Destiny of Community*, first published in 1998, and Jean-Luc Nancy’s ubiquitous essay *The Inoperative Community* of 1986, begin in remarkably concordant fashion. Esposito opens his book by stating that:

> Nothing seems more appropriate today than thinking community; nothing more necessary, demanded, and heralded by a situation that joins in a unique epochal knot the failure of all communisms with the misery of new individualisms. Nevertheless, nothing is further from view; nothing so remote, repressed, and put off until later, to a distant and indecipherable horizon.¹

Nancy begins thus:

> The gravest and most painful testimony of the modern world, the one that possibly involves all other testimonies to which this epoch must answer... is the testimony of the dissolution, the dislocation, or the conflagration of community.²

Taken together, they discern a contemporary ‘dissolution’ of community, which, while ‘remote’ and ‘repressed’, is nonetheless ‘demanded’ and ‘necessary’. Importantly, these two writers, in accordance with a common trait within contemporary sociology and political philosophy, focus on the key importance of the fall of what Nancy refers to as ‘real communism’ in the generation of a contemporary lack of, and desire for, community.³ In this paper, I shall focus on the effects of the shift from Soviet socialist republic to independent capitalist state in Estonia on the concept of community, and its manifestations within contemporary Estonian society. In particular the focus will rest upon the artist Kristina Norman, and the means through which she attempts to negotiate post-communist community through her documentary and performative artistic practice.

Norman has since 2006 located her practice firmly within highly politicised territories, largely related to the specific socio-political situations deriving from Estonia’s independence after the fall of the USSR. One particularly prominent focus of her work has been the Bronze Soldier, a Soviet monument which until 2007 was located in the centre of Tallinn before being hastily and controversially moved to a less visible space on the outskirts of the city by the Estonian government. Here, her installation ‘After-War’ (2009), as well as several of the artist’s earlier works, will provide case studies for an exploration of contemporary convergences of community and post-communism in contemporary art.

³ Ibid., 2.
practice. The writing of Ferdinand Tönnies and Zygmunt Bauman, specifically Tönnies’ concepts of Gemeinschaft (Community) and Gesellschaft (variously translated as Civil Society/Society/Association) and Bauman’s theories of ‘really existing community’ and ‘the community of our dreams’ will provide the theoretical basis for this discussion.4

Specifically, the focus will lie on two discrete yet interconnected negotiations of post-communist community undertaken by Norman. Firstly, ‘After-War’ raises the issue of the contemporary nature of what Bauman calls ‘really existing communities’ in post-Soviet Estonia. Here I argue, through comparisons between the communities in question in Norman’s work, and dissident artistic communities of the 1970s and 80s, that a fundamental shift in the infrastructural formation of ‘really existing communities’ has occurred as a result of the shift from Soviet state communism to independent capitalist. This shift can largely be characterised as one from Gemeinschaft to Gesellschaft. Secondly, Norman in ‘After-War’ as in many of her other works questions and toys with the notion of community itself, by which I mean to suggest that she is negotiating not simply ‘really existing communities’ – or the supposed manifestations of the concept of community – but the actual concept in its raw, hypothetical form. This conceptual community is what Bauman refers to as ‘the community of our dreams.’5 The fall of ‘real communism’ also largely entailed the death of this dream, and thus Norman’s enquiry stands as an investigation into the post-communist void of community caused by this death.

Norman’s methods are as absurd as they are activist, provoking criticism both for the ethical transgressions of her actions and for the apparent playfulness of her interventions in such tumultuous sites. In one action, documented and displayed as part of ‘After-War’, she reinstalls a gold replica of the Bronze Soldier in its original location. The inflammatory nature of such an action raises questions of art’s suitability as a means through which these issues can be viewed. What can art offer to this discussion, and can the ethically problematic nature of such work in fact be viewed as the source of its agency? The final section of this paper will examine these and other related questions surrounding the issue of art’s involvement in community, socially or politically engaged practice.

Defining ‘community’

Dennis Poplin, in his book Communities: A Survey of Theories and Methods of Research, discusses the diversity of meaning associated with the word ‘community’ and suggests that this diversity is responsible for ‘diminishing its usefulness for purposes of scientific communication.’6 The multifarious and widespread deployments of the term ‘community’ may be at the heart of the empty and confused contemporary status of the word, but one truth derives from this assortment; namely, that there is not one single, cogent definition of the word. The Polish Sociologist Zygmunt Bauman proposes in his 2001 book Community: Seeking Safety in an Insecure World that ‘community’ instead stands for a variety of discrete social formations. The two of relevance here are what he terms ‘really existing community’ and ‘the community of our dreams.’7 At the most basic level, the distinction

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5 Bauman, Community: seeking safety in an insecure world: 4.
7 Bauman, Community: seeking safety in an insecure world: 4.
between the two is a distinction between locality and universality, the former pertaining to ‘really existing community’, while the latter characterising the ‘community of our dreams. He describes ‘really existing community’ thus:

A collectivity which pretends to be community incarnate, the dream fulfilled, and (in the name of all the goodness such community is assumed to offer) demands unconditional loyalty and treats everything short of such loyalty as an act of unforgivable treason.8

The community which Bauman refers to as ‘the dream fulfilled’, he terms ‘the community of our dreams.’9 This is a hypothetical or theoretical community; an archetypal, and to some degree utopian, state of absolute and universal ownership of the common. As opposed to the ‘really existing community’, it does not and indeed cannot exist in reality. Rather it exists as a perpetually receding horizon, which, however many steps one takes towards it, remains infinitely distant and unreachable. As Bauman states:

‘Community’ stands for the kind of world which is not, regrettably, available to us – but which we dearly wish to inhabit and which we hope to repossess. Raymond Williams… observed caustically that the remarkable thing about community is that ‘it always has been’. We may add: or that this is always in the future.10

This is not to debase its agency as a concept however, rather it is this distance and abstraction which lends it agency. The provision of this archetypal matrix by which one’s current state can be measured allows society to envisage means through which it can improve, through which the common can come to be better discerned and administered, through which it may come closer – although of course never reach – ‘the community of our dreams.’

Bauman’s discussion of two interconnected yet discrete inferences of the term ‘community’ is in keeping with much literature surrounding the subject. Alphonso Lingis, for example, opts for a similar bifurcation in his work on the subject of ‘rational communities’ and the ‘community of those who have nothing in common,’ while Maurice Blanchot highlights the ‘unavowable community’ and the ‘negative community.’11 Bauman’s dual definition also bridges a theoretical gap between those who have theorised community in terms of the local variant and those to whom it stands for something more abstract. At the local extreme one could mention Austin Williams, who in his introduction to the edited volume The Future of Community (Reports of a Death Greatly Exaggerated) discusses ‘local communities, virtual communities or ethnic communities,’ prefacing the term with delimiting adjectives stipulating specific groupings united around specific circumstances.12 In an artistic context, Suzanne Lacy talks of ‘members of the Pittsburgh black community,’ providing two

8 Ibid.
9 Ibid.
10 Ibid., 3.
specific identities in order to limit and localise the particular community in question here. Other signifiers of this localised take on community are the use of articles – ‘a community of shipyard-workers’ or ‘the Jewish community’, for instance – which implies the existence of other separate communities existing outside of the community at hand. ‘The community of our dreams’ is similar in nature to the more universal variant of community espoused by philosophers such as Jean-Luc Nancy, Giorgio Agamben, Blanchot and Lingis. A simple demonstration of the more abstract nature of this universal form can be provided by again looking at the adjectives prefacing ‘community.’ Nancy talks of the ‘inoperative community,’ for example, to add to Lingis and Blanchot’s ‘rational’ and ‘unavowable’ communities.

**Gemeinschaft to Gesellschaft**

Kristina Norman has focussed extensively on issues of national identity in Estonia in works such as ‘Pribalts’ (2006) – an hour-long documentary in which she tracks down her former classmates from her Russian language school in Tallinn – and ‘Monolith’ (2007) – a 15 minute short film comprising found footage, stop-motion animation, and handheld camera footage shot by the artist. ‘Pribalts’ detailed a journey made by the artist from Tallinn to Moscow, where many of her former classmates had moved to, and primarily focussed on Seryozha Shchedrin, who had left Estonia to become an actor in Moscow’s Mayakovski Theatre. By virtue of Estonia’s *Jus Sanguinis* nationality laws, Shchedrin, among hundreds of thousands of others of Russian extraction, was not granted Estonian citizenship, instead being eligible only for the grey ‘alien’s passport’ of a ‘non-citizen.’ This constituted Norman’s first foray into the subject of Estonian-Russian relations and issues of identity.

‘Monolith’ continued in this vein, the artist turning her attention to one specific visual symbol and a concise distillation of the issues at hand in the form of the ‘Bronze Soldier’. The Bronze Soldier of Tallinn, a Soviet war memorial commemorating the Red Army soldiers in World War II, had remained in a central location in Tallinn in a busy square for sixteen years after independence, but had perpetually been the source of concern and disagreements. A plan to relocate the statue, which stood above the grave of numerous Soviet soldiers in the Tõnismägi area of central Tallinn, had caused outrage, largely amongst the city’s Russian population, and the reciprocal Estonian response to this anger led to confrontations, looting and violence across Tallinn. Norman begins her film with an animation of the statue flying through space to the tune of *Also Sprach Zarathustra*, consciously echoing the start of Stanley Kubrick’s *2001: A Space Odyssey*. The statue falls to earth before flying across the Russian-Estonian Border and landing in Tallinn. There are clips of reaction to the event from such figures as Vladimir Putin and from Russian television chat-shows, before the film ends with an image of the monument’s boots, the rest of the statue detached and out of sight, underwater in a flooded Tallinn – realised again using animation and computer effects.

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15. ‘The citizenship law that had been passed in February 1992 granted automatic citizenship rights to those who had it before the Soviet occupation in 1940 and to their descendants, while the residents who had arrived in Estonia during the Soviet era (and their descendants) were classified as aliens.’ A. Triisberg, "Between Nation and People: On Concepts of (Un)Belonging," in *After-War*, ed. Andreas Trossek (Tallinn: Center for Contemporary Arts, Estonia, 2009), 97.
Both works consciously highlight the relationships between two groups which correspond to Bauman’s configuration of ‘really existing community’, the Estonian majority population of Estonia and the Russian minority. They may be accurately defined thus in that they conform to Bauman’s description of the manner of unity which forms ‘really existing community’.

‘We’… means people like us; ‘they’ – means people who are different from us. Not that ‘we’ are identical in every respect; there are differences between ‘us’ alongside the common features, but the similarities dwarf, defuse and neutralize their impact… And not that ‘they’ differ from us in every respect; but they differ in one respect which is more important than all the others, important enough to preclude a common stand and render genuine solidarity unlikely…16

This may seem a rather generalised and flattening assessment of the Russian and Estonian ‘communities’ in Estonia, however, it gains more credence when understood in the wider context of Bauman’s argument. He states that, in keeping with his appraisal of the contemporary state of society as being a ‘liquid modernity’, community is now formed on temporary and fragile alliances, which briefly unite people not due to any overriding similarity, but due to momentary circumstance. He continues:

Let us note that the questions of which of the differences is ‘crucial’ – that is, which one is that kind of difference that matters more than any similarity and makes all common feature seem small and insignificant… is minor and above all derivative.17

Elsewhere he expands, stating that:

The most characteristic form of [postmodern community] is fluidity, liquidity, changeability… more like Immanuel Kant’s aesthetic communities than Ferdinand Tönnies’s Gemeinschaften… They have no other firm ground but the members’ commitment to stand on, so communities live as long as the attention of the members is alive and emotional commitment is strong.18

The Russian and Estonian populations may not at all times and in absolute unison hold their Russian-ness or Estonian-ness as the absolute ‘crucial’ building block of their identities, and thus the basis of any community they form, however, in the form of the Bronze Soldier situation and the ensuing disturbances, circumstance offered the opportunity for national similarities to become the dominant basis of community for a sizeable portion, albeit for a brief period of time. Similarly, as Bauman notes, these fluid, liquid, changeable communities are equally founded on difference. In this situation ‘the differ in one respect [nationality] which is more important than all the others.’ In Monolith, footage is shown of each group accusing the other of Nazi tendencies, differentiating themselves from the rival community by casting extreme aspersions, and in doing so proclaiming that they, by contrast are not Nazi. Difference is exaggerated as a means of distinguishing the two communities engaged in this particular altercation.

While in 2007, as shown in ‘Monolith’ there was a relatively strong degree of unity, crystallised by the Bronze Soldier’s removal, amongst the Russian population of Tallinn, by 2009 the ‘attention of the members’ and the ‘emotional commitment’ had somewhat dissipated. In ‘After-War’, Norman revisited the subject of the Bronze Soldier again, two years after she had produced ‘Monolith’. ‘After-

17 Ibid., 176-77.
‘After-War’ consisted of, amongst other objects, a 2 metre tall, gold-painted replica of the monument hanging from the ceiling, almost parallel to the ground; a rotating advertising hoarding displaying its faciae the site of the monument before and after its removal; and a video documenting a performance the artist had undertaken on 9 May 2009, the former Soviet ‘Victory Day’ commemorating the victory of Soviet forces over Nazi Germany in 1945. This video and performance are the elements of ‘After-War’ requiring particular attention in this context.

The video shows the artist arriving at Tõnismägi, the site of the Bronze Soldier prior to its relocation, amidst a small crowd of gathering members of the local Russian community, to whom 9 May still represents a day of huge historical import. Norman brings with her the vast gold replica of the Bronze Soldier and proceeds to erect it in the spot of the original monument. Some take photographs, others lay flowers around its feet. However, the fervour and ‘emotional attachment’ is no longer present. The crowd are jovial and passive, in contrast to the impassioned activity witness two years prior. Norman’s intervention is greeted positively, but hardly rapturously. Indeed much of the admiration and happiness at this ‘reinstallation’ of the statue seems tempered by a desire not to attract the attention of the ever-imminent police. While the label ‘The Russian community’ still pertains, there is no longer the overriding single common point, which ‘defuses’ all differences between those members of the community.

Bauman alludes the writings of Ferdinand Tönnies in his appraisal of ‘really existing community’, suggesting that this formation is not akin to Tönnies’ notion of Gemeinschaft. Tönnies describes the Gemeinschaft as ‘community of spirit, working together for the same end and purpose.’ Graham Day summarised the concept of Gemeinschaft succinctly in noting that it is a ‘coordinated action for a common good.’ While these qualities may be to a degree discerned in the communities in question here, Tönnies also points to a longevity of Gemeinschaft, a sustained and ‘complete unity.’ Here the coherence between the two sociologists notions of community breaks down.

While Bauman does not go on to discuss Tönnies’ idea of Gesellschaft this concept seems far more applicable to the ‘communities’ at stake in Norman’s work. Tönnies characterises the Gesellschaft (usually translated as ‘society’, or indeed left in the original German) thus:

A group of people who... live peacefully alongside one another but... without being essentially united – indeed, on the contrary, they are here essentially detached... in Gesellschaft they stay together in spite of everything that separates them... Everyone is out for himself alone and living in a state of tension with everyone else.

Elsewhere he adds that ‘whatever anyone has and enjoys, he has and enjoys to the exclusion of all others – in fact, there is no such thing as a ‘common good.’ The fluidity and changeability discussed earlier suggests that there is no longer the ‘complete unity’ of Gemeinschaft, rather, allegiances may

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19 Tönnies, Community and civil society: 27.
21 Tönnies, Community and civil society: 22.
22 Ibid., 52.
23 Ibid., 53.
shift, waxing and waning according to the individual needs, desires and circumstances of members of communities. While one may, by the uniting factor of having Russian parentage, be a member of the Russian community, it does not constitute one’s existence within a Gemeinschaft. Instead, other uniting factors may take precedence over nationality at different points and render another community more vital or crucial to one’s identity. Thus, the groupings seen in Norman’s work are negotiable, changeable, variegated, far more akin to the notion of Gesellschaft, people may ‘stay together in spite of everything that separates them’ when it suits, when it is profitable for the individual.

Ferdinand Tönnies notes of community that it ‘grows most easily where people share the same or a similar calling or craft.’ As such, Norman’s work provides a further case study of a ‘really existing community’ in Soviet and post-Soviet Estonia, that of the art world she inhabits. Tracing the recent history of the ‘artistic community’ – for want of a better phrase – provides further evidence of a contemporary leaning towards the Gesellschaft model of social grouping, while suggesting a shift from Gemeinschaft to Gesellschaft in Estonia which occurred concurrently with the shift from Soviet republic to independent capitalist state. The contemporary art world internationally, like virtually all other domains of early twentieth century capitalist activity, shares a great deal with Tönnies early modern conception of Gesellschaft. The recent ‘social turn’, as Claire Bishop has dubbed it, has manifested itself in an increasing tendency towards collaboration, cooperation and participation and this has been echoed by an institutional desire for ‘public benefit’, ‘community engagement’ and ‘impact’. While this constitutes a movement away from the historical notion of the individuality and even isolation of the artist, it does not by any means represent an infrastructural shift towards Gemeinschaft. There is no widespread sense a ‘complete unity of human wills’ or ‘community of spirit’, as Tönnies characterises Gemeinschaft to be found in the art world. Rather, there exists a situation in which artists, arts workers, curators, funding bodies, gallerists and so on are placed in a networked relationship of mutual reliance, yet individual ambition, conforming far more to Tönnies’ Gesellschaft in which ‘everyone is out for himself alone and living in a state of tension with everyone else.’

The specifics of Kristina Norman’s situation are a particularly interesting example. Firstly, it is key to note that ‘After-War’ was produced for the Estonian pavilion at the Venice Biennale in 2009. She was awarded this honour as a result of a competition in which various Estonian galleries and arts institutions, in collaboration with artists, put forward proposals to a selection panel. While the art world of Estonia, especially given its relatively small size, is forced into a community of sorts, it is a community based on competition, of working together in order to achieve personal gain. Secondly, while Norman’s Biennale show was well received abroad, the Finnish gallery Kiasma indeed buying her whole show, the reaction to her selection, her Bronze Soldier intervention and to the final installation from within Estonia was mixed at best. The artist encountered difficulties regarding the showing of her installation in Tallinn at the Kunstihoone gallery after the Biennale, meeting resistance from numerous figures within the Estonian art world, including some from within the gallery itself. Once again, the artistic ‘community’ in Estonia, as is largely the case internationally, can be demonstrated to be based on competition, difference and ‘a state of tension’, as Tönnies states.

This is in marked contrast to the Soviet-era artistic environs of Estonia, during which community in the Gemeinschaft sense was both the default social formation for the artistic community as well as being a primary form of dissidence and opposition to the Soviet system. Estonia, like the rest of the

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24 Ibid., 27.
Soviet Union, operated an Artists Union system, the Soviet Estonian Artists Union having been established in 1943. Artists were required to become members of the union, thus legitimising their practice, however at the cost of severe limitations on artistic freedom. As such, many artists chose to undertake their practice in a non-official capacity, forming underground artists’ groups operating outside of the prevailing system. These groups tended towards dissident practice, a trait exhibited most visibly in neighbouring Latvia, whose Art Days, despite being established by the Soviets in the 1950s, became sites of anti-establishment art practice, dissent and demonstration. These artistic endeavours, however, were not informed by the individualism demonstrated by the contemporary art world, rather they were acts of collective resistance, or, as Graham Day states ‘coordinated action for a common good.’ This was not an example of artists working together as a means towards personal success, rather an instance of unity through a ‘community of spirit’, one uniting factor – resistance to the Soviet system – negating and overshadowing divisive factors.

Pragmatically, the lack of any financial competition, indeed the lack of any financial involvement in the dissident Soviet-era art world whatsoever negated much of the incentive for intra-community competition. Furthermore, the lack of any formal infrastructure, exhibition spaces and so on, required artists to cooperate and act in unison in order for them to have any forum for the work whatsoever. However, to focus too heavily on these factors is to ignore the dissident motivations of these artists. An action such as People in Cages (1987) by Olegs Tillbergs, Sarmite Malina and Sergejs Davidovs was an example of ‘a group of Soviet citizens [behaving] like free citizens in an unfree society.’ The artists enclosed themselves in cages in a public park during an Art Day in Riga in 1987, while the gathering crowd were from time to time dispersed by the military. Here the artists ‘addressed the unprepared audiences through simple associations and often also oppositional subtexts which focused on panhuman issues and also revealed public sentiments in metaphor.’

With independence and the escape from Soviet totalitarianism, the single uniting factor which brought these artists together into a genuine community in the Gemeinschaft mould, disappeared, and with it the artistic Gemeinschaft of the Baltic States. As Bauman notes:

The original revolutionary alliance - one that overwhelms the resistance of administrators of the ancien regime - is not normally a reflection of the unity of interests among forces of dissent. As a matter of fact, grievances which bring variegated groups into political alliance by its opposition to the government of the day, are highly differentiated as a rule – and more often than not mutually incompatible… But would the unity of opposing forces survive the fall of the communist state? And would such forces be similarly energized by the uncertain attractions of the future regime?

Dissident artist groups disbanded on a grand scale, and artists originally associated with these groups distanced themselves from their pasts, eager to establish themselves as individual artists jostling for position in the early years of ‘cowboy capitalism’ in post-Soviet Eastern Europe. It is notable that T Group, a community of artists in Estonia during the 1980s, largely ceased to exist after independence.

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and one of their core members, Raoul Kurvits, felt the need to replace the ‘s’ in his name with a ‘z’ and proclaim the arrival of the new ‘post-Group T Kurvitz’. Kurvitz went on to exhibit at the Venice Biennale and had a ‘not overly modest solo exhibition at the Tallinn Art Hall.’ The united oppositional community of the Soviet era was replaced by a landscape populated by numerous, fluid, changeable opposing communities, as seen in Norman’s work, and ambitious, competitive individuals, demonstrated by the post-Soviet nature of the Estonian art world. Gemeinschaft was replaced conclusively by Gesellschaft.

The death of the dream

While the most overt negotiation of community in Norman’s work deals with Bauman’s ‘really existing community’, she also extensively concerns herself with a more conceptual investigation of community. Norman utilises ‘really existing communities’ in her work as a means towards a more in-depth negotiation of the nature of community in its more accurate yet abstract sense, what Bauman referred to as ‘the community of our dreams’. Furthermore, the Estonian, and by extension post-communist, contexts in which Norman has produced her work has lent a specific tone to this discussion. Norman deals with the nature of community (of our dreams) after the fall of what Nancy called ‘real communism’. She actively negotiates the location, nature and possibility of ‘the community of our dreams’ after the death of the dream, after the death of the great project of community, communism.

Jean-Luc Nancy across numerous texts from throughout his career deals intensively and extensively with the relationship between the etymological siblings of ‘communism’ and ‘community’. In perhaps his most widely disseminated text, The Inoperative Community, he states that ‘the word “communism” stands as an emblem of the desire to discover or rediscover a place of community.’ In a later essay, ‘The Compearance’, he develops this thesis:

Communism, without doubt, is the archaic name of a thought which is all still to come. When it will have come, it will not carry this name – in fact, it will not be a “thought”, in the sense that it is understood. It will be a thing… Communism is the paradoxical sign which at once signals the end of a whole world and the transition into another. A first world will be undone in the “real” treason of implosion of “communism.” Another world will have opened itself in the new structure of community.

Communism, in summary, is the project of community. It is the political manifestation of the drive towards the ever-receding horizon of community. As Nancy points out, it is always ‘still to come’, an accusation which mirrors Bauman’s realignment of Raymond Williams’ appraisal of community.

29 Ibid.
30 Norman herself states that ‘a culture of opposition exists in Estonia… a classical example of a cultural entity which defines itself through opposition with The Other’. K. Norman, “Poetic Investigations,” in After-War, ed. Andreas Trossek (Tallinn: Center for Contemporary Arts, Estonia, 2009), 7.
31 Nancy, The inoperative community: 1.
(‘that always has been’), ‘that it is always in the future.’ Thus, communism is intrinsically interwoven with the conceptual ‘community of our dreams’.

The fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 signalled not only the death of ‘real communism’ in Europe, but the death of the idea as well. Nancy acknowledges the widespread belief in this death, while fighting it trenchantly, speaking of:

... the ridiculous belief that floods in on us from all sides: the idea that we are done with Marxism and communism, that it is simply over. As if history, our history, could be so inconsistent, so phantasmic, so flaky to have carried us along for one hundred and fifty years on clouds that dissipate in a moment. As if error, pure, simple, and stupid, could thus be corrected, regulated, mobilized. As if thousands of so-called “intellectuals” were simply fools, and especially as if millions of others were even more stupid as to have been caught in the delirium of the first.

While he challenges the verity of this ‘belief that floods in on us from all sides’, he nonetheless accepts that to the vast majority, communism in all its forms died in 1989, and if we are to equate the ‘still to come’ nature of communism with the ‘always in the future’ nature of ‘the community of our dreams’, and see communism as the political project of community, then one can clearly discern in 1989, the death of the dream, an apparently unsurpassable and final roadblock on the way towards the dream of community (or the ‘community of our dreams’).

This death has been largely confirmed and compounded by capitalism’s seemingly inherent incompatibility with community. Again, one can return to Tönnies in order to explain this incompatibility, as Eugene Kamenka did in his 1965 essay ‘Marxian Humanism and the Crisis in Socialist Ethics’, in which he writes on the shift from ‘the Gesellschaft of capitalism into the free, fraternal Gemeinschaft of communism.’ Several decades later, Slavoj Žižek echoed this equation of Gesellschaft and capitalism, and Gemeinschaft and communism. He expands on this binary, stating conclusively that the idea of a ‘capitalism cum Gemeinschaft’, a capitalism which allows community to be involved in its political project, is an ‘impossible desire’. Capitalism, as Bauman has stated, “‘melted all solids’; self-sustained and self-reproducing communities were high on the list of solids lined up for liquefaction.”

It may seem somewhat contradictory to state that a dream – something necessarily detached from, or beyond, reality – can die as a result of the very real shift from one political system to another. After all, if it is ‘of our dreams’ then people may still dream of community despite the existence of a

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33 Bauman, Community: seeking safety in an insecure world: 3.
34 Nancy, "La Comparution/The Compearance: From the Existence of" Communism" to the Community of" Existence"," 375-76.
36 S. Zizek, Tarrying with the negative: Kant, Hegel, and the critique of ideology (Duke University Press Durham, NC, 1993).
37 Ibid.
38 Bauman, Community: seeking safety in an insecure world: 30.
political system opposed to it, or indeed because it is so unavailable and even prohibited in the realm
of the real. However, the nature of this dream is that in order for it to remain in mind, there must
exist a discernable path towards it. It is akin to Derrida’s notion of ‘democracy to come’, the use of
the infinitive form of the verb ‘to come’ suggesting an ‘infinite promise’, and connoting distance – it is not
imminent – yet necessity – it is needed.39 If there is no path visible, however, it cannot be ‘to come’,
rather it is a detached dream with no bearing on life and the present day, thus losing its agency as a
class. Also of use in explaining the importance of the path is the notion of the ‘radical imaginary’
put forward by Cornelius Castoriadis, in which ‘society constitutes itself through… a cultural
template for… creativity, ideology and utopia,’ in other words, what we experience today is based
on a societal and collective imagination of the future.40 Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, in Hegemony
and Socialist Strategy, take up this notion, proclaiming that ‘now, without “utopia”… there is no
possibility at all of the constitution of a radical imaginary.’41 If communism was the project of a utopia
of community, then without that project we can no longer imagine a means towards it.

Thus, the nature of the post-communist ‘community of our dreams’ at stake in Norman’s work is that
of a void, a vacuum. She is negotiating a post-community malaise, the result of a universal post-
communist condition. Simon Sheikh in his essay ‘The End of an Era’ uses the archetypal image of
Lenin pointing to the horizon in explaining this condition.42 Lenin’s oft-quoted question ‘What is to be
done?’ was asked in communist contexts with a pre-established answer; we move towards the
horizon being pointed at. Now, however we do not know how to answer the question, moreover the
question spawns more questions, increasingly baffling us into a state of disorientation and
directionlessness. ‘Where do we go? How do we get there? What kind of politics and society can we
imagine now? Or, where are we in our actuality?’ 43 ‘Where do we go?’ While communism suggested
we go towards community, now this answer is impossible. ‘How do we get there?’ The previous path
has been destroyed and the new one is unclear. The death of the dream has led to a detachment of
community. While it was previous loosely anchored in the present –drifting somewhere infinitely far
from the present, but nonetheless tied to it – it is now loose, still infinitely far away, but no longer
with any mooring. This detachment, this void and this death make the subject of ‘the community of
our dreams’ eminently open to negotiation, a task Norman takes up in ‘After-War’.

Negotiating the void

Interestingly, it is not always entirely clear which scene or event represents which
community’s or which entity’s point of view… it probably matters little. The point lies in the
‘absurdity’ (not humorous by any intention) of the cacophony of opinions, visions and
positions which emerge.44

43 Ibid., 75.
This statement, made by Andrea Wiarda in an essay on Norman’s ‘experimental documentary’ ‘Monolith’ in A Prior in 2008, raises perhaps the central feature of Norman’s work, one that has become increasingly exaggerated since Wiarda’s essay was written. Norman’s concern, despite her proximity to the communities implicated – she lives in Tallinn, was educated at a Russian school and has both Estonian and Russian parentage – lies far more on the nature of the communal relations linking together these communities, than on the particular political agendas on display. In ‘Monolith’, as Wiarda suggests, it is almost impossible to completely differentiate the various standpoints and communities from one another, and indeed, often both sides accuse the other of the same traits. Both, for instance, suggest that the other espouses Nazi-ism. What Norman presents, accentuated by the swift cuts, far from seamless editing, is a deafening, conflicting and confusing racket. In ‘After-War’ it seems initially that this tendency may have dissipated somewhat, given the apparent political activism she undertakes in the installation of a gold soldier in the place of the previous Bronze Soldier. Reaction to the performance in the Estonian media confirms this initial reading. Estonian Interior Minister Juhri Pihl observed ‘I don’t know whether it is art. It is a provocation though,’ while commenters on Estonian online news services left posts such as ‘It is anti-state activity and the “artist” Norman should be sent to prison for a long time.’ However, her presentation of the ‘After-War’ installation alongside another recent work ‘We are not alone in the universe’ (2010) in an exhibition of the same name at the Kunsthalle in Tallinn, suggests that the cacophonous and absurd nature of ‘Monolith’ has been retained, and indeed heightened.

‘We are not alone in the universe’ is a short documentary film shot by the artist and her film crew, detailing the unveiling of a small monument in the middle of farmland in rural Estonia on the site of an apparent UFO sighting. The monument itself is a small rock with the letters ‘UFO’ etched into it. The unveiling itself is a small affair, attended by the owner of the farmland, a couple of local residents, Norman and her film crew, and a supposed ‘UFO expert’. The monument is initially hidden underneath a dishcloth, the removal of which is heralded by the lighting of a single firework. Following this, the owner of the farmland, who also instigated the installation of this monument in honour of his deceased mother who allegedly saw the UFO landing, and the UFO expert both give short speeches. The scene is presented as quaint, odd and somewhat parochial. The juxtaposition of this piece alongside ‘After-War’, with its vast, recumbent and suspended soldier, painted in a garish, egregious gold, invites comparison. The soldier becomes a kitsch icon, the physical lightness – as demonstrated by its placement hovering or floating a couple of feet off the ground – and luminosity contrast wildly with the weathered weightiness of the original Bronze Soldier. In the video documenting the gold soldier’s installation in Tõnismägi, the original site of the Bronze Soldier, the gold replica is even blown over by the wind. This circumstantial, small detail gains added significance in the contexts of the installation’s exhibition at the Kunsthalle. The emphasis on this exhibition thus lay on the absurdity of these monuments, rather than on any potential political reading of the work. Norman’s interest is focussed squarely on these visual symbols and, in ‘After-War’ in particular, the strange power they hold in the formation of common bonds and community. As such, her work can be viewed not simply as simple documents regarding the point of conflict between two ‘really existing communities’, but as studies on the very nature of community itself.

The ‘cacophony of opinions, visions and positions’ presented in ‘Monolith’ seems to mirror the post-communist disanchoring and detachment of community described above. Points of unity and difference are so confused, so conflicted that they become impossible to discern. Politics and society are presented by Norman as being directionless, meaningless and absurd. There is no ‘radical imaginary’, no clear path visible, rather there is a discordant mess of people frantically searching for such an imaginary or path. Bauman’s ‘community of our dreams’ has been replaced by a nightmarish disorder. In ‘the community of our dreams’, Bauman states, ‘we are never strangers to each other. We may quarrel – but these are friendly quarrels, it is just that we are all trying to make our togetherness even better and more enjoyable than it has been so far and, while guided by the same wish to improve our life together, we may disagree how to do it best.’ This is certainly not the form of quarrelling on display in Norman’s work; in fact, to call it quarrelling is to downplay the worst occurrence of violence in Estonia since the Second World War to an alarming degree.

The removal of the monument, both the original Bronze Soldier and the gold replica – confiscated by the police within a few minutes of its installation – betray a further manifestation of the post-communist lack of community. In both cases, the public sphere, in the Habermasian sense of an open, politicised and democratic forum for freedom of debate and expression, is closed down and compromised by the authorities. In the first case, this closure of the public sphere was a long-term, calculated plot instigated by the Estonian government as a means of suppressing dissent amongst the Russian population – by removing their most potent symbol of identity – and the growing discontent between Estonians and Russians. In the second case, it was a simple knee-jerk reaction to an act which did not conform to the desired neutral usage of the public sphere. Both demonstrate the intrinsic opposition between post-communist capitalism and community. As has been extensively argued by Chantal Mouffe, Michael Hardt and Toni Negri, Jacques Ranciére and others, community is not devoid of difference and disagreement, rather it is a state in which difference and disagreement are manageable and managed, if not necessarily resolved or negated. Chantal Mouffe proposes that difference must be dealt with in an ‘agonistic’ rather than ‘antagonistic’ fashion, treating your other as an adversary rather than an enemy. Largely, prior to the removal of the Bronze Soldier, tensions between the two communities had been comparatively agonistic, while after the government-initiated move to relocate the monument, differences between the two become the site of an antagonistic conflict. The Bronze Soldier, while somewhat divisive, had also been a point of discussion and negotiation between conflicting standpoints. The effect of moving the Soldier led initially to violent battling, and in the longer-term, the suppression and silencing of what voice the Russian community had, and by extension the suppression of the root causes behind the disagreements between these two communities.

46 Bauman, Community: seeking safety in an insecure world: 2.
47 ‘By “the public sphere” we mean first of all a realm of our social life in which something approaching public opinion can be formed. Access is guaranteed to all citizens.’ J. Habermas, ‘The public sphere: an encyclopedia article (1964),’ New German Critique, no. 3 (1974): 49.
48 Andres Kurg has discussed at length the relationship between the Estonian government’s treatment of the public sphere and their attempts to ‘suppress or compromise issues that could have endangered… access [to the European Union]’. He also goes into the relationship between the Bronze Soldier and what he discerns the suppression of a ‘counter-public’ in great depth. A. Kurg, ‘The Bronze Soldier Monument and its Publics,’ in After-War, ed. Andreas Trossek (Tallinn: Center for Contemporary Arts, Estonia, 2009), 49-60.
Pascal Gielen, in he and Paul De Bruyne’s recent edited volume *Community Art: The Politics of Trespassing*, discusses the work of the Belgian artist, Benjamin Verdonck. He describes one specific project, which ‘focused attention on the problem of refugees, illegal immigrants and other stateless people’ thus:

The socially engaged artist had put up a cardboard house in the middle of the street on which he had written familiar advertising slogans, such as ‘Nokia, connecting people’ and ‘My home is where my Stella is’.

Gielen suggests of Verdonck’s piece that ‘the very same project which, in the street, enjoyed a certain degree of subversion, dissolved into common sense in the museum.’ The implication here is that while the work was ‘in situ’, in public space, it had argued a very particular political case, a contentious one at that, in the confines of the gallery space it was greeted with a public who ‘nodded approvingly when it ascertained that the political message it had deciphered was the correct one.’

Norman’s work operates in a similar fashion. While in the confines of Kiasma, where the work now resides, or the Kunstihoiine, or perhaps especially the Venice Biennale pavilion, it is somewhat neutered of its activist potential. The original performance, the (re)location of the gold soldier, however did to a degree earn Juhri Pihl appraisal of ‘I don’t know whether it is art. It is a provocation though.’ What Norman provoked was dialogue, and in doing so lies the primary source of her negotiation of community. In the period between ‘Monolith’ and ‘After-War’, debate surrounding the Russian population had somewhat dissipated, the community had become mute. Norman, as evidenced by the strong press reaction to her intervention – on an international level as well as merely within Estonia, it was reported by the BBC, a rare honour for an item of Estonian news – had prompted a site for the reopening of an unfinished debate. As Bauman states regarding the nature of communities, ‘they have no other firm ground but the members’ commitment to stand on, so communities live as long as the attention of the members is alive and emotional commitment is strong’.

‘After-War’ actively reignited attention and emotional commitment so as to allow, or facilitate, the reawakening of both the community and unresolved differences and disagreements associated with the community. If agonism, according to Mouffe, is required as a constituent part of ‘the community of our dreams’ – if I may combine two theorists writings – then the artists contribution, at least ‘in the street’, was to allow this agonism, which had been hidden and silenced by a prevailing political and social system, to resurface and play out to its fullest. If post-communist politics is intrinsically anti-community – or even post-community – then the logic of the artist seems to have been to bypass the political system entirely.

However, Gielen’s accusation of impotence remains. He continues:

Verdonck’s authentic artistic signature does not really seem to serve the good cause. The credibility of his action, with its real political claims, gets lost in an impotent world of fiction.

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51 Ibid.
52 Ibid., 18.
53 Ibid.
because, in the first place, the artist aims to realize an artistic project rather than a political statement with serious societal consequences. No matter how well-intentioned his engagement may be, his civil action always comes second.\textsuperscript{55}

Norman, even during her intervention seems to be partaking in a performance, a charade of sorts, protesting naivety and innocence when the police arrive to remove the sculpture despite her undoubted understanding and intelligence regarding the situation at stake. The playful handling of her installation, as well as its exhibition next to a work which deals with such a relatively trivial matter as a supposed UFO sighting, both compound this sense of light-heartedness and reveal the ‘childish touch’ of an artist.\textsuperscript{56} As such, how does one appraise Norman’s negotiation of community in these works? Certainly, despite initial media attention and a brief revival of discussion, the status quo has since been restored and debate has once more become silenced, but on the other hand, Norman’s intention from the start was to create an artwork, a prerogative which invites, as Antony Downey has argued and a point which Claire Bishop and Grant Kester have debated extensively, alternative criteria of critique than social or political activism.\textsuperscript{57}

My intention here is not to outline or propose such criteria, but rather to suggest that Norman, through an expository documentary mode presents her audience with a case study of the contemporary nature of community – in both the senses discussed earlier - and through the ‘childish touch’ and ‘playful packaging’ of the artist questions and toys with its constitution. While the era of post-communism has brought with it a period of what one may term post-community, the work of artists such as Norman, alongside writers and theorists engaged in similar discussions, points towards means of addressing the apparent contemporary void of community. Norman does not position us any closer to the ‘community of our dreams’, she does not show us a new path, or clear away the debris obstructing previous paths, but by the same token neither does contemporary politics. Through the autonomy afforded the artist, however, she is able to circumvent contemporary political structures which are fundamentally inhospitable towards community and reopen some form of debate regarding the situation at hand. Thirteen years after Roberto Esposito posited that, given its absence in society, ‘nothing seems more appropriate today than thinking community,’ and twenty five years after Nancy’s assessment of the ‘the dissolution, the dislocation, or the conflagration of community,’ their comments still pertain.

\textsuperscript{55} Bruyne and Gielen, Community Art: The Politics of Trespassing: 18.
\textsuperscript{56} Ibid.
Bibliography


