The Anonymous Community

Helen Petrovsky

Why anonymous community? I would first of all like to clarify the meaning of these terms since they have been extensively used (and perhaps abused) in way too many contexts. They have been assigned a value-judgment, have indeed become domesticated. For community, in its ordinary usage, stands for a group, an identity and a belonging. No matter how fuzzy or indeterminate its actual contours may be. Anonymity, for its part, is something that we, individuals, as members of highly developed societies, are taught to scorn and avoid—the very ethics of social existence demands achievement and success, therefore a radical breakaway from hopeless anonymity. Indeed, what could be worse than remaining just "anyone?"

But let us try to reverse the perspective. Let us try to develop a non-substantive view of community and to speak up for anonymity. Let us come up with an apology of both. In my task I am greatly aided by the already existing thinking on community. I am referring to a constellation of thinkers, itself a community, who have been the first to raise these issues. Bataille, Nancy and Blanchot—a helpful point of reference, the beginning of a thinking of community. (However,

as I hope to show later, there are other beginnings, and that is what makes the task so challenging for us today—finding insights related to a different time and place but already imbued with the same passion, already mapping out a future commonality of thinking, if I am permitted to say so.) These three thinkers have posed a type of adhesion that precedes all socially definable or established forms. A belonging without any guarantee of belonging. Community, according to this reading, always already exists and yet remains unattainable. It exists as the ultimate possibility of cohesion, which no single existing society can ever implement. Or, to be more exact, it harbors this possibility which reminds of itself in various forms. (According to Nancy, it can be traced in the very myth of community that societies so painstakingly produce and maintain; then in what he calls "literary communism," or the continuity of writing cutting across the variety of literary institutions; also, in the non-dialectical nature of love which poses a challenge to thinking as such; and, finally, in the decline, the disappearance of divine names, which opens onto the advent of nothing other than community.)

To sum it up, or to give a new take on the subject, community is that which is devoid of any communitarian "essence." Indeed, no such thing exists. If we think of a "place" for community, it remains "in between"—shapeless, it is rather about the "between," as in the phrase "between us" or "between you and me." An interval which never ceases to create a bond without actually bonding; a touch, provided

that it happens at the very limit where singularities (unlike subjects) communicate. However, community is also about questioning communication and communion. And, therefore, about resuscitating the once lost unity—that of non-alienated, "intimate" life. (Here is where Bataille's problematic predictably comes in: in the blue of noon—a powerful recurring metaphor—the individual remembers: it is some sort of awakening, a *déjà-vu*, opening onto the lost immanence of being. In this immanence, one might say in this impossible community, men are unaware of the limiting laws of production—they are both "sacred" and "bare.")

In any case, we are invited to think community as having no substance, therefore never reduced to any one of its possible representations, and as resolutely avoiding closure. I would like to pick on these challenging insights in order to suggest a reading of community that will hopefully link it to some of our own basic concerns. Given that "we" are historical beings undergoing a certain moment in our no less historical lives. A moment for which definitions, no matter how tentative, already abound: the post-modern and even the post-post-modern, the post-industrial, the post-historical (another variant of history?), and, on a more modest scale, the post-Soviet itself. I would like to analyze this moment by discussing "anonymous communities," incomplete and indefinable collectives attested to primarily by their fantasy lives.

Needless to say that art has the greatest capacity for revealing the truth of the moment. In my own research I have

been particularly indebted to some of the current practices of photography where it reaches the very edge of visibility. No longer simply showing what is to be seen, photography triggers off collective fantasizing—but it does so in a necessary way. For our access to history, indeed our experience of history, is mediated through these fantasies which seem to condense and materialize, in an almost impossible way, the very conditions of seeing. Photography, therefore, simultaneously renders the visible *and* the conditions of visibility, and in this it is undoubtedly historical.

What are these imagining collectives? And whence the necessity of such imagination? Here, finally, we must return to anonymity. Instances of anonymity are many. The most striking one, perhaps, is what has been pejoratively called *the banal* by being implicitly set against the individual and the uncommon. However, the banal seems to map out a new space of commonality which does not reduce to the *artifacts* of the banal and to their use in common. What banality points to is a new form of subjectivity emerging in "post-societies," call them whatever you will. Or, to be more accurate, to a new form of partaking—that of the stereotypes. In terms of photography and its theorizing it would most certainly mean this: "*my*" photograph as the epitome of individual affect, the site of a non-written personal story (to remember Barthes' astonishing project), gives way to "*whatever*" photograph pointing to an affectivity which is *a priori* shared. And the "bleak," interchangeable surface of "whatever" photograph is precisely the space of anonymous freedom.

There is no use showing pictures. Or at least almost none. What I am talking about has little to do with the material certitude of an image. It has to do with the image coming into visibility when it is recognized by a fantasizing collective. And such recognition is twofold. On the one hand, the image crystallizes into a meaningful whole, i.e., emerges precisely as *image*, whereas on the other, it gives rise to a fleeting collective which recognizes *itself* in the image. Neither viewer as such nor the fantasizing collective exist prior to these dreams. We may say that fantasies return or, better still, are *restored* to the dreaming collective, for what is recognized is exactly this mode of being-in-common. There is no other "content" to dreams except for affective partaking.

But let us not be entirely hostile to material surfaces. Surfaces, objects, artworks are the sites where fantasies, however temporarily, reside. The latter are just so many displacements of representation, of the represented. But, as I have tried to indicate, fantasizing is connected to a certain moment when the very understanding of the passing time undergoes dramatic changes. Discontinuous and out of joint, time today is either reified by being sliced into decades, which, as a way of grasping one's own immediate past and present, is itself a form of historical consciousness (here I am referring to Fredric Jameson's seminal interpretation). Or, time is, so to say, enhanced, rendered whole in one's imagination. Reified time is the presentation of a space or unit, whereas time whose wholeness is achieved through the workings of imagination is an attempt to come to terms with

nothing other than experience. Fantasies are the simple indication that experience took place. However, by the same token, they are never arbitrary.

What is at stake is indeed experience. Anonymity as shared experience. Examples of negative anonymity are too painful and too shocking to be cited in passing. Yet, everyone is well aware of this anonymity-to-death which still has to be tackled theoretically. Anonymity-to-death, I will remind, is a polemical figure that Giorgio Agamben addresses to Heidegger who, with his philosophy of being-to-death, implicitly asserts the value, as well as the dignity of the individual faced with this "decision." The reality of concentration camps, however, points to a different mode of existence, in actual fact of survival—one in which the symbolic value of death itself is brutally denied. Negative anonymity, therefore, has to do with the utter loss of "humanity" or what undeniably appears as such. However, in these wholly indistinguishable faces, in these violently wasted lives something remains—indeed a "remnant," to use Agamben's term. It is a blank—in life and in death, in memory, as well as in language. Yet, being constitutive of post-war subjectivity, the remnant is precisely what guarantees *our* humanity. Agamben refers to the structure of shame. But I will stick to experience.

Experience is something which remains essentially un-(re)presentable. Given we are not talking about the experience that is accumulated and stored. Experiential knowledge; positive knowledge; the continuous flow of human memory

enriched by experience—we are referring to no such thing. Obviously, there are less traumatic examples of experience and likewise of anonymity than the one I cited a moment ago. But what appears indisputable for all the cases in question is that experience *calls for* translation. Otherwise it runs the risk of perpetrating a nightmare coupled and eventually replaced with just another *ressentiment*. Or, this experience will simply fall into oblivion together with the collectivity to which it occurred. Collective experience or the experience of a collective demands articulation. To link this to my preceding argument—it has to be recognized.

So let us once again return to anonymity. Anonymity has always been treated as that homogeneous backdrop against which individuation takes place. Forms, subjects and values would, moreover, come into being by virtue of surpassing this inertness, by way of leaving it behind. Therefore, it would be something like a springboard for future social incarnations and, on a different level, would serve as metaphor for the unpleasantly amorphous. (Think of the "anonymous reader"—there is nothing more disconcerting, even now, than the so-called anonymous reader, someone no true writer or academic, for that matter, would really want to address. Art in general, to be sure, has been a form of individuation *par excellence*, a way of positing values; and this has been done *against* (both in contradistinction and in opposition to) something which remains stubbornly indifferent or inert—shall we say "anonymous?") But let us think of anonymity as standing outside the binary division: if we still

choose to call it background, then there will be no figure to set it in contrast against. Or, rather, every figuration would appear as a fold of the anonymous, while anonymity would be reminiscent of a primary element engendering the world itself.

Synonymous with experience, anonymity belongs neither to presence nor to re-presentation. As such, it cannot be represented. But what *is* represented, especially today, can point to anonymity as an essentially shared experience. What is the Soviet? (The exploration is facilitated by our addressing the topic retrospectively.) What is the world which has crossed the threshold of globalization? What is the world for which this definition remains empty, providing not even the slightest hint at a descriptive discourse? What is private life in the obvious absence of privacy? These and other related questions spring from an unresolvedness—there in no answer to them, at least no answer coming from "us" who are undergoing this kind of experience. But while being "in" (or "inside") experience, we do form transient communities irrespective of our actual social identifications. Experience, to be sure, cuts across accepted identifications by suspending and dramatically reworking them all. It opens onto a space of commonality (likewise of communality), a space interspersed and laden with affect.

Anonymity, therefore, has nothing indistinct or obscure about it. It is, on the contrary, the moment of greatest clarity that one could possibly expect: on the one hand, it indicates a primary bond *apropos* experience, a bond already in place;

while on the other, it shows that there is no ready-made collective which would neutralize and thus forget this experience by way of assimilating it. Anonymity is a flash of the false and living memory of a community that is being reborn.

Spectators of Cindy Sherman's famous *Film Stills* dating from the late seventies insisted on having seen "those movies." Of course, it was impossible to attribute them exactly—and a viewer is not an art historian, after all. The tremendous success of these photos lies in the fact that they were recognized—by the so-called ordinary people. What Sherman managed to produce was a dreaming collective—a collective dreaming history itself whose experience is strongly mediated by the movies. "A democracy of glamour"—this is how Laura Mulvey has defined this imaginary construct of the 50s. Something close and even stored in memories and at same time endlessly remote, for the experience of time is itself from now on imagistic, cinematic. But again, this is not a pictured image. Rather, it is a crudely constructed representation which *gives way* to collective fantasizing. The image is forgotten inasmuch as *something else* attaches itself to its surface—this something, this invisible supplementation is precisely the way in which Sherman's pictures form a space of commonality. Such commonality, to be sure, is profoundly affective. For the image of *that time* is itself a shared experience of history.

The cruder the image, the better for our common dreams. The material surface is just the site of so many ruins.

However, they are brought to bear on a greater, indeed a seamless whole because each one of these details, in its turn, has been touched and magnified by so many aspiring glances. What the viewer "sees," therefore, is nothing other than this aura—a detail which is already sublated, transfigured, suffused by the dreamworlds of others. (I am here referring to a term coined by Susan Buck-Morss, as well as to a phenomenon she has so originally analyzed precisely by putting it into a historical perspective.) In other words, instead of categorizing his or her historical experience, the viewer allows it to "float" in its pre-semantic openness and overabundance.

This same kind of exploration seems to have been carried out by my compatriot Boris Mikhailov. Mikhailov, however, not so much plays on the cinematic-historical as he traces lines of continuity for Soviet experience, or the experience of the Soviet, to be more accurate. I would take the liberty of summing up his work as follows. Experience never allows for a plenitude of meaning. While it is taking place, it lacks in meaning, it is meaningless, in fact. At best, we can hope to focus on what Raymond Williams has so aptly called "structures of feeling"—a form of sensibility still in the making. Needless to say that structures of feeling are short-lived. They may roughly indicate a decade or a generation. Also, they are quite diffuse. But what they do point to is a collectivity having its *emotional*, i.e., fantastic, phantasmatic stakes in the passing moment. And this exactly is what is lost in the master narratives of history. Barthes, as we re-

member, was scandalized by the irretrievable loss of the "unknown" individual, as well as his or her emotion. His great book on photography is an affirmation of filial love. But no less can one be scandalized and saddened by the loss of whole collectives whose only "objective" quality would consist in a shared affective being.

To return to Boris Mikhailov and his lifelong endeavor. What he has been trying to do is to translate this blank or omission—the emotional lives of the generations which are closest to us. Of our fathers and grandfathers. What do we know about them? What will we store in our memories, especially if historical memory in my country was as such at one point denied? How can we hope to preserve the truth of "their" moment if we know very little about it, almost nothing at all? Again, I am not referring to a knowledge of facts and of dates. I am talking of the experience of the Soviet with a special emphasis on both of these words. And if I have already briefly spoken on experience, let me now concentrate on the Soviet. The Soviet that Mikhailov is showing us—and here lies the greatest paradox of his photography—is in fact *the doubling* of representation and its visible signs (which are also signs of the Soviet: ethnographic details, culturally coded landscapes, etc.) with the invisible which allows for this very reading to take place. Only the *punctum*, to use Barthes' term, or the implied photographic reference has to do with an *a priori* collective. What is posited here, in other words, is a spectator who does not exist in some sort of contemplative isolation (the paradigm of clas-

sical art). On the contrary, in order to "see," you must already be part of a dreaming collective. For these pictures, very much like Sherman's, become truly visible through a shared affectivity which resurfaces in them.

I am not talking of empathy. Contemporary works of art are not empathetic. Their stakes are much higher. They allow you to enter a space of commonality which is the very condition of seeing and likewise recognition. And they do so in various ways. To return one last time to Boris Mikhailov. If the continuity of experience ever takes place (something I mentioned above), it is by setting against each other, i.e., juxtaposing or putting into play two types of experience. The Soviet reaches plenitude in the post-Soviet and, presumably, vice versa. And it is by making both form a constellation, in the Benjaminian sense, that we can hope to uncover the meaning of this historical eventuality. At a moment when our "own" past seems to be completely disowned—for what are we, bearers of a post-Soviet identity?—we can hope to come closer to that other "omission" which is the life of our fathers.

The anonymity of the Soviet. For it to be discovered as such, in its non-alienating aspect, it has to be both hidden and shown. What is this "other" of the Soviet which transforms all visible signs crowded in a photograph into a historically meaningful image? I would tentatively call this "other" forces of the private. It is not just private life rendered visible in the captured moment—be it swimming, celebrating, picking mushrooms and the like. It is that which

never enters visibility but which seems to blast wide open, to strangely decode all public (but also private) spaces. The thrust of life itself, if you will, or that primary distinction—forces of the private *versus* substance and representation—which accounts for visibility. Such forces work their way through and even across existing social forms and definitions. They contextualize our vision of the Soviet in a very special way. It is by imagining or rather *fantasizing* their existence, something prompted by the changing nature of the Photo, that we, today, succeed in recognizing and acknowledging "that" moment.

And we do so by switching on to "them," by creating some sort of a circuit. "We" and "they" are interchangeable. Or rather "we" and "they" form the only possible continuity of history, a history yet to be written. Which is not to say that this history *will* be written. It is unwritten precisely inasmuch as it avoids closure by speaking for and in the name of an indeterminate collective—the anonymous community. Yet, this possibility is itself historical. It opens up in a time of so many devastating ends and endings and is thus a promise. Something is still promised to us.

In the remaining time let me very briefly and, therefore, irresponsibly sketch out other instances of a thinking of anonymity, at least of a thinking that seems to contain this potential. In a book which by the standards of our time is old (but not outdated)—I am referring to the *Différend* published in 1984 and to a subsequent study *L'enthousiasme* (1986)—Jean-Francois Lyotard examines Kant's "critique"

of history. He is specifically interested in the strange status of what Kant calls *Begebenheit* and what is translated as "sign of history." Kant's task, it should be explained, is to answer the question (against the Faculty of Law, and there is indeed an ongoing conflict) whether it can be affirmed that the human race is constantly progressing toward the better. The requested demonstration is complicated by the fact that neither progress, nor the human race, being objects of Ideas, can be presented directly. Which is only aggravated by the phrase itself having an explicit bearing on the future. Moving away from any intuitive given (*Gegebene*), Kant comes up with his most intriguing concept of *Begebenheit*, an event or "act of delivering itself which would also be an act of deliverance, a *deal* [*une donne*]" (the Crakow manuscript calls it *Ereignis*). This event would merely indicate and not prove that humanity is capable of being both cause and author of its progress. Moreover, the *Begebenheit* must point to a cause such that the occurrence of its effects remains undetermined with respect to time. Being on the side of freedom, it may therefore intervene at any time in the succession of events.

I will hasten at this point just to show where and how exactly Kant comes up with his answer to the problem. He does find an index, a *Begebenheit* of his time, which for him, predictably enough, is the French Revolution. However, he makes a necessary and exciting detour. For the *Begebenheit*, strictly speaking, is neither momentous deed nor occurrence, but "the mode of thinking (*Denksungsart*) of the specta-

tors which betrays itself publicly in [the] game of great upheavals…" This "mode of thinking" is simultaneously universal (albeit not lacking in partiality) and moral (at least in its predisposition), in a word, progress itself. As for the French Revolution, whose outcome remains unknown, it "nonetheless finds in the hearts of all spectators (…) a wishful *participation* that borders closely on enthusiasm, the very expression of which is fraught with danger;" this sympathy, however, springs from nothing other than the moral predisposition of the human race.

Lyotard, a profound scholar of Kant and the sublime, immediately stops to analyze this enthusiasm which is expressed by so many "disinterested" national spectators. For him it is a "modality of the feeling of the sublime," in fact extreme and paradoxical: an abstract presentation which presents what is beyond the presentable ("presentation of the Infinite"). Bordering on dementia, itself an *Affekt* (an extremely painful joy), enthusiasm is condemnable as pathological from the point of view of ethics, yet aesthetically it is sublime, because, says Kant, "it is a tension of forces produced by Ideas, which give an impulse to the mind that operates far more powerfully and lastingly than the impulse arising from sensible representations." Now, the *Begebenheit*, or sign of history, continues Lyotard, can be understandably found on the side of audiences watching great historical upheavals—firstly, revolutions themselves are like spectacles of nature, they are formless and thus account for an experience of the sublime; secondly, the spectators,

as opposed to direct participants, are not empirically implicated and therefore, so to say, corrupt. However, being in the "theater hall" is an unprecedented privilege. For the feeling of the sublime experienced by the spectators spreads out toward "all the national stages"—in other words, is potentially universal. This universality, as Lyotard goes on to show, is of a very special nature, for, quite unlike cognitive phrases, the feeling of the sublime "*judges without a rule*" (italics added). Its *a priori* is not a rule universally recognized, but one that *awaits* its own universality. Universality in abeyance, in suspense (*universalite en souffrance*), a *promise* of universality. Which necessarily brings us to *sensus communis*. Characteristic of the aesthetic judgment, this common or communal sense is an "indeterminate norm" in that it does not guarantee that "everyone *will* agree to my judgment…" But, as a faculty of judgment, it does take account of the "mode of representation of all other men." To finish the argument, enthusiasm as a probative *Begebenheit* (and also a pure aesthetic feeling) calls upon a consensus which ends up being nothing other than "a sentimental anticipation of the republic" (in the form of a *de jure* undetermined *sensus*).

Here I will stop. I will only point to the one important consequence that follows. The universality invoked by the sublime (as well as by the beautiful), concludes Lyotard, is merely an Idea of community, for which no proof, that is, no direct presentation exists or will ever be found. What there does exist, however, is a bond, a bond of "communicability"

between two parties to a conflicting phrase, and this bond retains "the status of a feeling." Communicability, one might say, is a way of "logging onto" the phrase of taste and thus of informing it with varying degrees of heterogeneity. For Lyotard *sensus communis* (in aesthetics) signifies an "*appeal to community*" (italics added) which is carried out *a priori* and judged without any rule of direct presentation. What is *a priori* shared is "feeling."

Of course, it is no discovery that Kant opens space for a thinking of community. But thinking Kant according to this exigency is quite another matter. I would claim that this very "retrospection" is a sign of change—if not a *Begebenheit* in the proper sense, then at least something that emerges from within contemporaneity and that tends to be associated with the present-day "condition." There is much to discuss inside, as well as beyond the Kantian framework. Let us simply bear in mind the following. Community is never there, that is, it is not objectifiable. Not only does it remain unpresentable but it cannot be, properly speaking, achieved—even the French Revolution is meaningful to the extent to which it is *anticipatory* of the republic. (Community, let me note in passing, is on the side of that very eventuality which is dispersed in time: Kant's *Begebenheit* is what he explicitly calls "*signum rememorativum, demonstrativum, prognosticon*," a sign recalling, showing, and anticipating all at once.) Yet, there must be something that allows for a discourse of the community even though community itself cannot but fail. (And, one must add, it is always failed—always on the

edge of language, always indicating an "other" space, always, in a word, anonymous.) We *must* be able to deliver its message and its promise. For Kant, as Lyotard convincingly shows, the problem is resolved by the affective paradox of the sublime. A feeling is shared about a formless something that alludes to the beyond of experience, yet, the feeling itself constitutes an "as-if presentation" (be it the Idea of civil society or that of morality), and it emerges right there where the Idea cannot be presented, i.e., in experience. (Of course, the Kantian understanding of experience is significantly different from what was said about it earlier above. Rather, the *Begebenheit* itself would be synonymous to that experience.)

So, let me emphatically repeat that community calls for translation. And it keeps producing its "as-if presentations" in so many various ways. I have chosen to speak of photography and the virtual affective collectives that it brings into being. Which, of course, is just another name for anonymity. But anonymity is not timeless, to be sure. Rather, it is a way of approaching the post-Soviet, being an image of that experience (its "as-if presentation") and perhaps a sign. But in the same fashion anonymity indicates the emergence of a new subjectivity in our not so divided world—and it is the task of the scholar to formulate its definition.

Select Bibliography

AGAMBEN, Giorgio (1999). *Remnants of Auschwitz: The Witness and the Archive*. Trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen. New York: Zone Books.

BARTHES, Roland (1981). *Camera Lucida. Reflections on Photography*. Trans. Richard Howard. New York: Hill and Wang.

BATAILLE, George [1992 (1989)]. *Theory of Religion*. Trans. Robert Hurley. New York: Zone Books.

BENJAMIN, Walter [1969 (1968)]. "Theses on the Philosophy of History." In: BENJAMIN, Walter. *Illuminations. Essays and Reflections*. Ed. and with an Introduction by Hannah Arendt. Trans. Harry Zohn. New York: Schocken Books.

BLANCHOT, Maurice (1988). *The Unavowable Community*. Trans. Pierre Joris. Barrytown, N.Y.: Station Hill Press.

BUCK-MORSS, Susan (2000). *Dreamworld and Catastrophe: The Passing of Mass Utopia in East and West*. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press.

JAMESON, Fredric (1991). *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*. Durham: Duke University Press.

KANT, Immanuel (1963). *On History*. Ed., with an Introduction by Lewis White Beck. Trans. Lewis White Beck, Robert E. Anchor, Emil L. Fackenheim. Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill.

LYOTARD, Jean-Francois (1988). *The Différend. Phrases in Dispute*. Trans. Georges Van Den Abbeele. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

———— (1991). *L'enthousiasme. La critique kantienne de l'histoire*. Paris: Editions Galilée, 1986.

MULVEY, Laura (1991). "A Phantasmagoria of the Female Body: The Work of Cindy Sherman." *New Left Review*, # 188, July/August, p. 136-50.

NANCY, Jean-Luc (1991). *The Inoperative Community*. Ed. Peter Connor. Trans. Peter Connor *et al.* Forward by Christopher Fynsk. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

PETROVSKAYA, Yelena (2003). *Antifotografiya*. Moskva: Tri kvadrata.

WILLIAMS, Raymond (1977). *Marxism and Literature*. Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press.