

Paul Chan
**The
Unthinkable
Community**

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In Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, two men wait by the side of a country road for a man who never comes. If done right, that is to say, if done with humor, fortitude, and a whiff of desperation, the play is as contemporary, funny, precise, courageous, and unknowable as I imagine it was back in 1952, when the play premiered in Paris.

When I worked with others to stage *Godot* in New Orleans in 2007, we took many liberties to make it work at that place, for that moment in time. We set the entire play in the middle of a street intersection for one set of performances, and then in front of an abandoned house for another. The actors let the musical cadence of New Orleanian speech seep into the dialogue. We used trash that was left on the streets as props. But there was one thing I wanted to do, but didn't in the end: I wanted Vladimir and Estragon, the two main characters, to wait for Godot with people loitering nearby. So the country road that was supposed to be empty would teem with strangers walking by, sitting on the grass, or wandering aimlessly while talking on their phones, all ignoring the plight of these two homeless and luckless tramps. I think it would have worked. And this is because, in 1952, being alone literally meant not having anybody near. But today, one can be surrounded by, and in contact with, anyone and everyone, and still feel inexplicably abandoned.



Waiting for Godot in New Orleans, Lower Ninth Ward performance, 2007.

Communication ≠ Connection

One of the great mysteries of our time – besides the reason why the United States is still in Iraq after seven years, the magical thinking that enabled banks around the world to sell bad debts as good investments, and perhaps we can add here the enduring significance of Jeff Koons – is how the ever-expanding methods by which we communicate with one another – from cell phones to SMS, from e-mail to Twitter, from

Facebook to Chatroulette – are alienating us from others and ourselves.

There is no doubt that advances in technology have fundamentally transformed the nature and reach of communication in social life. These advances have also generated new forms of economic empowerment, cultural exchange, and, ultimately, new modes of living. Making connections is a serious business. And this business is, in turn, transforming the way such connections shape our sense of self.

The desire to communicate, to conjure in speech or sound or image or movement an inner experience that expresses what we want or who we are (or who we want and what we are) is being repurposed to serve a need beyond that of conveying and understanding. The telecommunications and related technology industries have capitalized on the demand for communication by producing ever more robust and specialized platforms for making connections. But this is not necessarily so we communicate and understand one another more, but rather so there is simply more speech-material to gather, transmit, quantify, and capitalize. In other words, communication is being industrialized. In the economic scheme of things, forms of expression are now a natural

resource, to be tapped and exploited for profit, like oil. And a productive life is today inextricably linked to generating more and more speech for others to hear, see, and read. To live fully in the present means to be in constant communication: the self as network. *Ego sum communicatio.*

But having more social contacts has not made for stronger social bonds. All the texting and friending may expand the number of people in one's life, but the links do not enrich the quality of the arrangements. Common interests bring people together. But what keeps them together is neither common nor easy. It takes an evolving awareness of the differences that naturally develop between two individuals, and a commitment to allow those differences to take root, so that common connections grow into singular bonds. The open secret to this process is time, the only dimension capable of registering the moments and ruptures that define the growth of an individual abiding an unbridgeable difference to become one for the other.

Time deepens connections, whereas technology economizes communication. This is why, despite the growing number of ways for people to be seen and heard, tele-technologies have ironically made it harder for people to comprehend one another. What matters in

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Chatroulette screenshot.

communication – understanding, relationality, interchange – has somehow gotten lost in the transmission. Cellphones, wireless devices, and the proliferation of social media online have revolutionized the ways in which we communicate, and at the same time, compressed what we say and type to such a degree that intelligibility is sacrificed for the sake of reach, ubiquity, and consumption.

Just as a language compels certain ways of describing the world that are naturally sympathetic to the worldview where that language originates, the kind of connections made over these ever newer and farther-reaching communicative forms possess an instrumentalized quality, as if all the different ways in which we make contact with one another only confirm that the only thing worth talking about is business. The messages transmitted and relayed begin to feel optimized solely to get things done, grab some attention, or build an audience. Communication becomes synonymous with advertising. It *is* advertising: expressions expressing nothing other than the desire to peddle influence, and promote _____.

In experiencing communication this way, something curious happens to time. Rather than strengthening connections, such communication

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over the course of time actually weakens them. Instead of being the essential element that potentiates more durable social bonds, time works as an entropic force. It is as if the longer a line of communication is left open, the more inauthentic and weak the connection becomes.

A voice that desires a reply sounds different than an echo that wants attention. If the connection between two people merely creates an echo chamber, each resounding with the other's need to be seen and heard, the quality of the connection would likely deteriorate over time, since there is no singular presence on either end to engage with or listen to. Perhaps some kind of law of social physics is at work here, the strength of the connection being proportional to the amount of friction and difference that connection can bear. Or it is simply that the kind of communication trafficking back and forth does not merit the focus and care that genuine communication demands, and dies off as quickly as it materializes, which in turn calls out for even more communication to be generated to compensate for the loss. Or maybe this is merely what it means to be contemporary: the inner experience of being relentlessly present for all, but accountable to none, and tethered to nothing



The Front, New Orleans.

except the industrial powers that network everything else.

A Short History of The Front

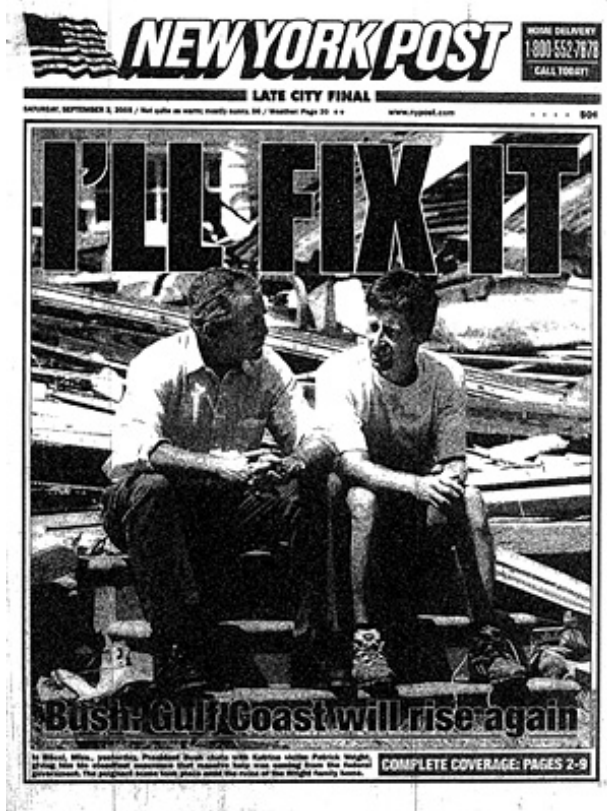
As part of the *Waiting for Godot in New Orleans* project, I spent the fall of 2007 living in the city and teaching at two universities: the University of New Orleans (UNO) and Xavier. Both schools lost teachers to Hurricane Katrina. So I made a deal with them. I would teach whatever classes they wanted me to and forego pay as long as these classes were open to all artists in New Orleans. I also requested that the classes be cross-listed at other colleges and universities, so students from other schools could attend them as well. At Xavier, I taught a Thursday afternoon class called "Art Practicum," where I worked with students on their portfolios for graduate school applications, helped them write resumes, and lectured on how critiques work. At UNO, I taught a Tuesday evening contemporary art history seminar. Every week, I lectured on an artist and his or her work.

On the last day of the art history seminar, I skipped the planned lecture (on outsider artist Henry Darger) and instead talked about art and organizing. The *Godot* performances (there were five in all on two consecutive weekends in early

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November 2007) had happened two weeks earlier. And while the experience was still fresh in their minds, I wanted to talk about the different processes and ideas that went into organizing the project. The lecture was freewheeling and associative. I talked about Beckett's history of working with prisoners to stage his work, my own experiences as an organizer, first in labor politics in Chicago in the 1990s, and then with the antiglobalization movement in the early 2000s. I discussed the art of negotiating and the politics of being obstinate. I offered a brief history of artist communities and collectives, and ended the seminar with a conversation with New Orleanian artist and visionary architect Robert Tannen.

After that last class, some of my students, a motley crew of MFA students from various schools, art teachers, and artists unaffiliated with any institution, decided to organize themselves into a kind of collective. Rather than wait for *Godot* or any other project to bring them back together, they wanted to create their own reasons for sharing and showing work, for themselves and others in the neighborhoods where *Godot* played. They wanted a community of their own.



Front page of the *New York Post*, September 3, 2005.

VOYAGE
EN
ICARIE

PAR
M. CABET.

FRATERNITÉ.

Tous pour chacun.

—
SOLIDARITÉ
ÉGALITÉ—LIBERTÉ
ÉLIGIBILITÉ
UNITÉ
PAIX.
—

○

AMOUR
JUSTICE
SECOURS MUTUEL
ASSURANCE UNIVERSELLE
ORGANISATION DU TRAVAIL
MACHINES AU PROFIT DE TOUS

AUGMENTATION DE LA PRODUCTION
RÉPARTITION ÉQUITABLE DES PRODUITS
SUPPRESSION DE LA MISÈRE
AMÉLIORATIONS CROISSANTES

Premier droit,
Direc.

—
A chacun
suivant ses besoins.

○

MARIAGE ET FAMILLE
PROGRES CONTINU
ABONDANCE
ARTS.

Chacun pour tous

—
ÉDUCATION
INTELLIGENCE—RAISON
MORALITÉ
ORDRE
UNION.
—

Premier devoir,
Travailler.

—
De chacun
suivant ses forces.

BONHEUR COMMUN.

PARIS

AU BUREAU DU POPULAIRE, RUE JEAN-JACQUES-ROUSSEAU, 14.
Dans les Départements et l'Étranger, chez les Correspondants du Populaire

1848

By organizing themselves, they were already working in a tradition of contemporary visual arts in New Orleans. At least since 2000, artists in the city have been moving into the Upper and Lower Ninth Wards and the Bywater neighborhood, to start galleries, build studios, and make a place for their friends and their work. Around 2000, KK projects, a contemporary art space and non-profit arts foundation, started on North Villere Street in the Eighth Ward. Sometime in 2002, L'Art Noir (billing themselves as "the premiere lowbrow art gallery in New Orleans") began doing shows in the Upper Ninth Ward on Mazant Street. In 2004, artists Kyle Bravo and Jenny LeBlanc set up Hot Iron Press, a small contemporary art and poster printshop in Bywater. Artist groups and community spaces continued to open even after Katrina: Barrister's Gallery, Farrington Smith Gallery, and Antenna Gallery in Bywater; L9 Center for the Arts in the Lower Ninth Ward; The Porch in the Seventh Ward; and Good Children artist collective and space on St. Claude Avenue.

Kyle and Jenny were among those who attended my seminars and decided to get together with others to create an artist collective that eventually became known as The Front. Starting in December 2007, and for the next eleven months, they gathered their resources and gut-renovated a building on the corner of St. Claude Avenue and Mazant Street. On November 1, 2008, The Front had their first group-show opening. They have gone on to mount a show every month since, with readings, screenings, and performances along the way.

Community

To want something new is a way to remember what is worth renewing. The Front's presence not only renews the history of New Orleans visual arts for a new generation, it also connects them with the venerable tradition of artist collectives that have sought, and continue to seek, what philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy has called a "compearance": the public appearance of a group of individuals working together that makes visible for the first time their "co-appearance," or "compearance." In order to compear, all the members of the group play a part in building a composition that, over time and through mutual cooperation, becomes substantial enough to stand in for the members as a whole. The figure that compears is what one calls community.

In a sense, community can only be recognized against the background from which it differentiates itself: a figure needs a ground to stand against. In the case of The Front, that ground is post-Katrina New Orleans. The devastation the hurricane left behind and the subsequent negligence of local, state, and

federal officials painted a bleak picture of a society abandoned and of people left to fend for themselves. The emergence of The Front and other groups in the city (artistic, political, religious, civil) is a testament to the will of the people to self-organize against the wake of a natural disaster slowly turning into a societal tragedy already precipitated by political inertia, poverty, and racism. What matters here is not how directly these groups confront or try to bring about an end to the wrongs, although this is a vital concern. Rather, it is significant enough that they choose to risk interrupting the seemingly entropic drift of things by organizing themselves against the current.

Like clockwork, epochs turn and return with the tumultuous cycles that produce economic bounty and human misery in equal measure. For the collective, the figure of community holds the potential for saying and doing it all differently. So what ultimately distinguishes community from society is the difference between imagining that reality can be transformed and realizing that it can only be managed. In this sense, politics becomes a form of groundskeeping. To rise above the ground, and stand with the strength of common purpose, gives the communal figure a definitive shape and enables the collective to remake existing politics so that it may serve a future life where substantive relations are the rule rather than the exception. The compearance of a real community expresses what actual society ought to be.

In self-organizing, members strive to create a living model of genuine social difference. This is the utopian aspect of any collective enterprise that is truly collective, rather than merely managerial or commercial. This is also how collectives like The Front echo, however distantly, utopian projects of the past. For in a sense, the golden age, in which communication is unfettered and relations are substantial, is never in the here and now, but always in the past. It is the past that provides the myths and models for how an originary and unbreakable bond between people once existed in the world; from the natural family to the Athenian academy, from the Roman republic to the first Christian communities, from the Paris Commune to May '68. Every collective reimagines for itself (knowingly or not) the lost or unfinished work of the past as theirs to complete, in order to lay the groundwork for a community to come. And what matters most is a collective vision, or better yet, a consensual blindness, that allows the collective to recognize, perhaps for the first time, that nothing is settled, that everything can still be altered, that what was done – but turned out badly – can be done again.

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The Unthinkable Community

There are no axioms one can apply to the human calculus that can render the emergence of social relations any more predictable or transparent. No amount of good will or careful planning can guarantee the outcome of a collective's work. It can always fail, or turn bad. Or worse. I am sure we have all witnessed examples of collectives, no matter how experienced or well-intentioned, endeavoring toward a figure of community, only to see their work collapse under internal divisions, irreconcilable differences, or general inertia; or, on the other hand, collectives that spiraled wildly but mindfully out of control, to a point where the community they attained became a monstrous testament to the human capacity to be inhuman.

Still, the desire for substantive relations persists. The connections people make that grow into ties that bind remain the most meaningful way for individuals to partake in the tremendous waste that is the passing of time, and in the moments that emerge from simply being together – which, in turn, make the passing of time not so wasteful after all. But these bonds also enable something else to be shared: the strange sense of incompleteness at the core of one's self. For what makes an individual singular (as opposed to merely different) has nothing to

do with personal qualities or styles. Singularity comes from the unique shape of what has yet to take place, lodged in the heart of the figure of one's self – making space for what is yet to come and what has yet to be done, in order to fully *be*.

This empty center, formed inside the cast of historical and existential experiences that has settled and hardened into the likeness of an identity, is neither seen nor heard, but felt, like cold wind against the skin. Within this void emanates the spectral presence of the unfinished, the half-formed, and the unimagined, as a reminder of just how far one is from being complete and wholly self-sufficient. And it is only through social bonds that this essential incompleteness becomes exposed as the secret all singular beings share, and must stubbornly hold onto, in order to remain uniquely and fully present in the world. The sentiment evoked in lines like “you complete me” or “I’m nothing without you,” sung in curiously robotic R&B ballads by the likes of Keyshia Cole and R. Kelly, has ontological truth: they express the tremendous burden of one's singularity, of being utterly incomplete. By loving, struggling, or engaging intensely in some other way, one finds the chance to ease the burden by forging a bond deep enough to fill the void of singularity and feel

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Edward Hopper, *Morning Sun*, 1952.

a semblance of inner completeness.

Community, then, is what happens when we complete ourselves. Through purpose, members of the collective come together and merge with the work they have agreed to accomplish as one. And the more the collective realizes what it has set out to do, the more its members internalize the work as a greater living embodiment of themselves. It is this communal fusion that powers the collective. It is also what makes the experience so intense. It is in fact the intensity that makes it fulfilling. From the smallest collaborative project to the grandest nation-state, the concentrated pursuit of a common cause is what draws individuals into being members, and members into becoming a more perfect union, of and through themselves.

In essence, what is at stake is the notion that one is *only* an individual in this larger life. This does not mean that somehow the experiences of living outside the bounds of the collective are of a lesser quality or less authentic – only that they represent a life not wholly determined by one’s own design. Where contingencies make a mockery of one’s sense of control and shape the course of a life as much as volition, a collective offers shelter from the heteronomous forces that prevent us from

actualizing our fuller selves. An individual, through membership and community, takes on a *determinate* individuality, shaped by a general will and motivated to act in harmony with a common purpose that, in being realized, becomes the external manifestation of one’s own inner nature. A concretely realized community is tantamount to an individual life finally fulfilled.

But if this individuation relies on the figure of community in order to take shape, it becomes necessary for individual members and the collective as a whole to employ social, political, and psychic processes that serve the common purpose by preserving and defending the well-being of the whole over that of its parts. This emphasis, in turn, compels members to come together in such a way that commitment becomes a matter of surrender and surrender a radical form of commitment: the more common the bond, the greater the whole. And the essential incompleteness that differentiates one from the other in the first place, which holds no direct use or value for the coming community, becomes redefined as an inner contingency that must be fixed, a sin to be banished, a tendency to correct, a hole to fill.

But a life is more than the sum of its intentions and wants. The whole of our inner

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experience cannot be willed into existence or worked into a plan. The richness of one's continuously evolving subjectivity depends not only on the mental stuff that furnishes conscious life. It also relies on what is unreasoned, undreamed, or unrealized – in other words, all the latent memories, experiences, neuroses, and desires that silently haunt the consciousness of an active mind. The specter of unthinking shadows every thought. It is the force that embeds every act of expression with the imprint of a singular presence. It is the siren's song that draws us toward the empty center of our own unique and purposeless singularity. And it is this curious music, which one cannot help but play, that the community tries to silence, on behalf of our greater self, and in the guise of a common will.

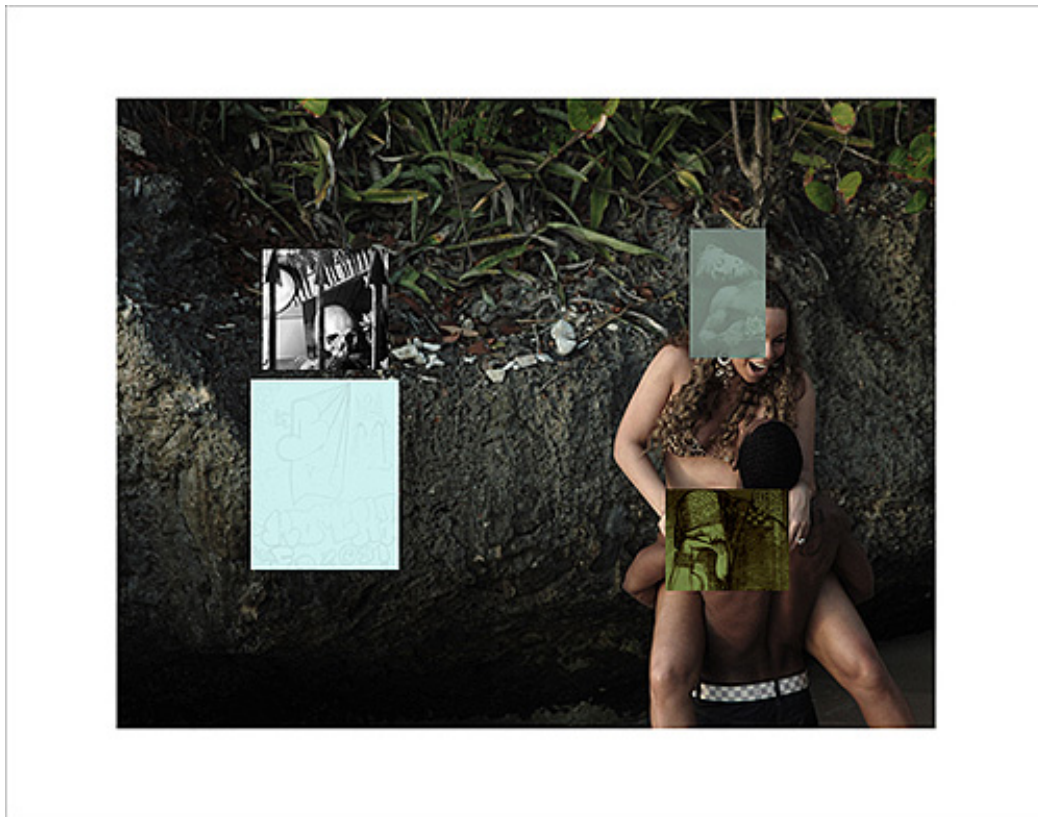
Lovers. Criminals. Artists?

For better and for worse, the notion of a common will shaping people's lives feels as contemporary as a rotary telephone. No one likes being told what to do. For the most part, the power of consumer sovereignty is what one exercises in order to become individualized and socialized today. And this is reflected by the explosive growth of online social networks, where

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communication and sharing blur with data collection and advertising to create and sustain connections that brook no distinction between telling someone something and selling something to someone. What appears to be simply a point of contact is in truth a channel of distribution for individuals to pick and choose goods, services, friends – all the parts that meet one's inner and outer needs. The network is a community as marketplace.

As such, the contemporary community has an even, temperate quality, like a pleasant, air-conditioned showroom. Differences between members may spark friction, but rarely do they produce heat or, for that matter, the kind of social combustion that generates enough intensity to potentiate inner change, the kind collectives empowered by a common purpose demand of their members before any figure of community can emerge. The process of determining one's inner worth by establishing a greater social identity through collective striving no longer offers purchasing power for anyone invested in living in the present tense. The individual today is made off-the-shelf and over-the-counter. In the vernacular of contemporary community, change is a matter of exchange.



Sam Pulitzer, *Untitled (from Hogg)*, 2009.

Is this why the most intense (and potentially, if not actually, dangerous) collectives appearing today tend to have an anachronistic quality about them? From Islamic and Christian fundamentalist groups (religion), to the Tea Party movement (nationalism), to The Invisible Committee (Anarcho-Marxism), it is as if the lives sacrificed during the course of globalization returned as vengeful specters in the guise of crumbling empires and fading ideologies, to haunt and disrupt the march of progress on the contemporary stage. And as wildly divergent as their political purposes are, what they hold in common is the wholesale rejection of the contemporary community created by globalization, and a commitment to building another community grounded in the ecstasy of communal fusion, and a dedication to renewing the social contract that once rendered the emergence of an individual contingent upon the actualization of a self-made community.

Perhaps to those for whom time is out of joint, this is the only way. “The past is never dead,” William Faulkner wrote. “It’s not even past.” Against the backdrop of the contemporary, these movements want community as it was once envisioned: as a crucible through which a more purposeful and accountable individualism can be forged. But religious zealots, homophobic and racist anti-statist nationalists, and neo-Marxian activists are not the only ones who want this.

For George Bataille, erotic love was the key to creating a community intense enough to generate communal fusion without sacrificing the singularity of the members. Bataille, who experimented with establishing different kinds of communities and philosophized about them in the 1930s, believed that a substantive existence determined by touch and forms of communication concentrated on expressing the power of libidinous contact was the only authentic way of countering the modernist tendency of reducing living beings into “servile organs” for state and society. Bataille also thought the community of lovers was a kind of resistance – however small and ultimately hermetic – against two movements gaining political ground in Europe at the time: Stalinist communism and Fascism. For Bataille, the ecstasy of erotic love immunized the lovers against political madness.

The Marquis de Sade, on the other hand, infamously declared lawlessness the common purpose of his imagined community. In his novel *Juliette*, Sade described the Society of the Friends of Crime. Made up of libertines of various class and social distinctions, they conspire to become lords of debauchery against an already corrupt state ruled by religious and aristocratic

powers. Crime, for Sade, was both a political expression and a philosophical embodiment. In crime, law is rendered ridiculous and shown for what it is: a capricious rule established by existing forms of authority to maintain power and control. By committing crime, members of the Society use the cunning of reason to make a mockery of authority. Sade, however, is not satisfied. If reason can be employed to destroy the laws of man, can crimes be committed to break the laws of nature? In *Juliette*, characters wonder aloud what it would take to snuff out the sun, in order, paradoxically, to fully reconcile themselves with Nature and her implacable spirit of destruction.

Lovers. Criminals. Artists? At its core, The Front is a communitarian experiment. Like erotic love for Bataille, and crime for Sade, The Front is trying to establish a community using an utterly precarious material. Living in the aftermath of a disaster that crippled the city, fourteen artists decided to try their hand at building some shelter for what they wanted to make and see. In an urban landscape that still lacks basic civil amenities to this day, they wanted art. This is the work. Simple enough. But what drives this work, and what forms the heart of a collective like The Front, is neither simple nor ever enough of anything to inform anyone in particular. For what makes art *art* is precisely how it embodies an uncommon purposelessness.



William Blake, *Whirlwind of Lovers*, 1826.

Art bears the signature of something inescapably singular – something utterly and compellingly incomplete. Without this signature to authenticate its presence, it is merely an illustration, a luxury item, propaganda, a tax shelter, an investment, a spectacle, an event, a decoration, a weapon, a fetish, a mirror, a piece of property, a reflection, a tool, a critique, a prop, medicine, a campaign, an intervention, a

celebration, a memorial, a discussion, a school, an excuse, an engagement, therapy, sport, politics, activism, a remembrance, a traumatic return, a discourse, knowledge, an education, a connection, a ritual, a public service, a civic duty, a moral imperative, a gag, entertainment, a dream, a nightmare, a wish, an application, torture, a bore, policy, a status symbol, a barometer, balm, a scheme, furniture, design, a mission, a model, a study, an investigation, research, window-dressing, a social service, an analysis, a plan, a publicity stunt, a donation, an antidote, poison, a pet. With this signature, art is none of these. And more.

This is what binds art to being. The two share the burden of embodying a singularity born of the incompleteness at the center of their respective forms. To give space and time and money and effort and whatever else one can muster to build a community that protects and preserves that singularity – when the whole point of a community is for individuals to find a semblance of completeness by becoming fulfilled with an other as one, through the spirit of a general will – might give the impression that what is being created is not a community at all. Or at the least, an unthinkable one.

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A version of this essay appears in the forthcoming catalog self-published by The Front collective in New Orleans. For more information on The Front, please visit www.nolafront.org

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