

Community Remains

A text commissioned for the last BA(hons) Photographic Art degree show at the University of South Wales, held in Cardiff on 9th June 2017.

In 2014 I was asked to write an afterword for the BA (hons) Photographic Art degree show publication, *Leaving the Building*. I wrote about “experience” and what that word means, negotiating its limits in relation to the illusory role photography plays in helping us grasp ungraspable experience as it unfolds all around us.¹ At that time, I had survived the dreaded first year out of university and felt I could relate to the myriad experiences of the following year’s graduating students. What was looming for them on the horizon, terrifying in its unknowability, was, for me, starting to show its shape; shifting from abstract experience into *an* experience.

Now, three years later, as the assimilation of the University of South Wales’ photography courses reaches its completion, I have been asked to return to this topic again. Unfortunately, the experiences of this year’s graduating students are unknown to me. This unknowing is not a bad thing—I am excited to see what they have been up to. However, I wonder, as I write these words in another city and at another university, am I still in a position to say anything meaningful here? How can I write about experience again without having a tangible experience in common?

What we do have in common is the influence of Peter Bobby, Eileen Little, Magali Nougarède & Matt White—not to mention the guidance of those previously a part of this team and their many invited guests. Each of them has been along for the ride with us, no more certain of what the future holds, repeatedly adapting to changes both inside and outside of the university. So what of their experiences? How do they collide with the experiences of we students and alumni?

What we share, if not an experience, is a community—and I do not mean this in the sense that we will soon be receiving the same alumni emails. The typical definition of the word “community” fails here. When asked how to define the “Photo Art” course (as it is affectionately known) I have often said: it is an arts course that takes photography as its starting point. It has produced works of photography, audio, sculpture, video, performance, and everything in between, and so to define our community through a common interest is reductive. Likewise, having moved from Caerleon and Newport to Cardiff, this community cannot be reduced to a shared space either. Rather “community” here refers to something beyond what the word itself describes.

These demands on the word “community” are central to experiences of the modern university—a space that must be ruptured for creativity to take place (even when the university itself paradoxically instigates the rupturing). Stefano Harney and Fred Moten ask, in their book *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning & Black Study*, what is the work of the modern university and what is its social capacity for producing a certain fugitivity from its controls?

If one were to say teaching, one would be performing the work of the university. [...] It is not teaching that holds this social capacity, but something that produces the not visible other side of teaching, a thinking through the skin of teaching

¹ Matt Colquhoun. “Songs in the Dark”. *Leaving the Building*. (Cardiff: University of South Wales, 2014), pgs. 151-153

toward a collective orientation to the knowledge object as future project, and a commitment to what we want to call the prophetic organization. But it is teaching that brings us in. Before there are grants, research, conferences, books, and journals there is the experience of being taught and of teaching.²

They go on to describe a “beyond of teaching”: a social praxis of pedagogy that does not simply transmit knowledge to the consumer-student but encourages an acephalic community of independent thinkers; a community of a shared secret that is fugitive to bureaucracy.

This “community” is not something worked towards and achieved but rather something experienced in itself, outside of regulation—the kind of community that Jean-Luc Nancy and Maurice Blanchot have respectively referred to as “inoperative” and “unavowable”. It does not exist for the sake of networking or profit or climbing the ladder of industry—the pursuits of the individual—but as a way of being that requires a collective subject in order to sustain itself. Jason Kemp Winfree, discussing “community” in the thought of Nancy, Blanchot and Bataille, writes that:

Community is not, therefore, an extant division or willed unity within the social order, but a configuration of luck and chance where one being opens onto another and is what it is only through this opening. [...] Community is constituted in the overlapping of wounds, the sharing not only of what cannot be shared, but the sharing of a suffering that is neither mine nor yours, a suffering that does not belong to us, but which gives us to one another, and in doing so both maintains and withdraws the beings so configured. [This community is] an exhilarating affirmation of chance, the will to be what befalls it but that its will could never produce.³

The word “suffering” looms large here as something abject in its negativity but it speaks to a wider experience that is folded within life itself; within the good and the bad; the trivial and the profound. (One of Blanchot’s primary examples is, hearteningly, “the community of lovers”.) From debt and dissertation stress to the political uncertainty that looms large over the institution and the world at large; from class trips and nights-out to exhibitions and those life-affirming moments of inspiration, the Photo Art community is one that exists through the necessity of navigating these various trials and triumphs together, starting with photography and moving continuously towards its outside. As such, this is not a photography course that wants to simply document the world and be cold to it—rather, it aims to make a world for itself to live in.

Maurice Blanchot, ending his book *The Unavowable Community*, asks if his thoughts have been worthwhile and I ask myself this question too, “given that each time we have talked about [this community’s] way of being, one has had the feeling that one grasped only what makes it exist

² Stefano Harney & Fred Moten. “The University And The Undercommons”. *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning & Black Study*. (New York: Minor Compositions, 2013), pgs. 26-27. Harney and Moten write specifically on the role of the black radical tradition in this “beyond of teaching”, a foundation I do not wish to erase. What they refer to as the “undercommons” is a community of figures displaced and dispossessed within the particular systems of the modern American university. Whilst this resonates most explicitly on the fragile ground of contemporary black experience, to invoke their criticality here more generally, on the occasion of the final degree show and dissolution of this course, nonetheless feels appropriate.

³ Jason Kemp Winfree. “The Contestation of Community” in *The Obsessions of Georges Bataille: Community and Communication*, eds. Andrew J. Mitchell and Jason Kemp Winfree. (New York: SUNY Press, 2009), pg. 41

by default? So, would it have been better to have remained silent?"⁴ Not at all: this question of community—unique in each instance—must be asked so that it may be entrusted “to others, not that they may answer it, rather that they may choose to carry it with them, and, perhaps, extend it.”⁵ It is here, in these requisite extensions, that Photo Art truly reveals itself.

Hopefully the event at which you will be holding this publication in your hands for the first time will be a testament to this, surrounded by students past and present who have travelled far and wide to say goodbye to a course that has shaped them far beyond the remit expected of any university course. It shall be missed... but this is not the end.

The community remains. The experience continues.

Matt Colquhoun

⁴ Maurice Blanchot. *The Unavowable Community*, trans. Pierre Joris. (Barrytown: Station Hill Press, 1988), pg. 56

⁵ *Ibid.*