*In the Spring of 2014 I was invited by Michael Wilson Editor, Guggenheim UBS MAP Global Art Initiative of the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum to moderate a text-based online panel discussion on the subject of alternative communities, loosely inspired by themes within the museum's forthcoming exhibition of contemporary art from Latin America. According to Wilson, this idea was "Suggested in part by Reinaldo Laddaga's writing on participation and emancipation, and by an article co-authored by Carlos Basualdo titled "Rules of Engagement: Art and Experimental Communities," the Forum would explores historical and contemporary definitions and manifestations of "community," and investigate the creation of utopian and other experimental models in the physical, intellectual, and virtual realms." In late March and early April in a series of three rounds, plus a one-hour "live chat" I engaged the three invited participants Lauren Groff, Pablo Helguera, and Stevphen Shukaitis.*

## Come Together, April 7-11, 2014

SESSION 1

**MODERATOR**
**Daniel Tucker**
Community is a tricky proposition, rife with potential confusion and difficulty, and its constitution occupies an enormous amount of human creative energy. To open our multipart dialogue on "coming together," I'd like to begin by considering the role of fictions and myths in community's definition and realization. Last week, in a seminar I've been teaching on political art in Chicago, my students and I watched A Call And An Offering, a video by Latham Zearfoss and Dylan Mira. The work documents Pilot TV, a temporary queer television studio organized around the theme of "Feminist Trespass" that took place in Chicago ten years ago, and starts with co-organizer Emily Piper Forman's explanation: "Pilot was what everyone who came made it. All the organizers did was spread this myth that this was going to happen, that there was going to be this DIY autonomous television studio."

Pilot TV's invocation of myth can be read in relation to the theory of social myths advanced by philosopher George Sorel. In his 1907 Letter to Daniel Halevy, Sorel considers the power of religious and other ancient myths as motivating factors for the rationalization of various, often individual, actions throughout history. His commitment to the myth of the General Strike is based on the insight that the working class needs to believe in a myth of something bigger and longer-lived, which can emerge from their collective existence to usurp both pragmatic and utopian impulses. Intellectuals use the concept of utopia, he argues, as a model for comparison with extant society, giving it a propositional quality that's open to refutation. He goes on to argue that myths cannot be denied in this way, that the results of the myth matter little and should be judged on their success in motivating action in the present, rather than functioning as "astrological almanacs."

Later in our seminar, the conversation turned towards a real estate developer who has long been touting a Chicago Arts District that has never fully caught on. It is as if the developer read The Rise of the Creative Classand misrecognized Richard Florida's promotion of the creative economy as the voice from the W.P. Kinsella's novel Shoeless Joe (filmed as Field of Dreams), whispering "If you build it, he will come." Cities throughout the United States have grappled with this kind of reinvention, often fumbling along the

way as neighborhoods are destroyed in the process. The implications of imaginary communities being imposed on real territories dot the entire history of politics, as demonstrated by a series of articles on the myth of the nation-state in the online journal GeoCurrents, which documents recent conflicts over territory. While on a different register than arts-district planning, these geopolitical examples provide a certain weight to what can on a more intimate urban scale be reduced to bickering over gentrification, authenticity and belonging.

Considering the arts district in relationship to Pilot TV's attempt to conjure a queer media convergence, there seems to be a similarity between the two ambitions. Despite the arts district being more profit-motivated, both aspired to invent a new social form. With the deformed strain of social relations that now characterizes urban life, it's not too hard to appreciate that getting together in an innovative way might require a bit of fictionalization. While many long-standing social institutions bring people together, there is still a lot of room for seeing, if you build it, who might come.

What, I wonder, do the panelists think the role of myths and fictions might be in inventing and experimenting with community today?

**PANELIST**
**Lauren Groff**
The central question in Daniel's kick-off text may be, at its heart, about time. All fictions and myths are also about time: we are temporal creatures, after all, and any story can be seen as a sculpture made out of words and time. But the word myth comes from the Greek muthos, which means something delivered by mouth, a story or tale or fable. To be a myth, it has to be believed by either the teller or the listener, or else it passes into folklore and is no longer a myth. Now this is where I'm getting hung up: one can believe a thing in the past to have already happened, and readily. Stories that we believe as capital-letter Truth have all happened in the past. I believe I just had a glass of wine, and as proof, I have the glass beside me with a coin of red in its bottom. But no matter how fervently you believe in something happening in the future, it will always be stuck in the yet-to-have-happened, and the distance between now and the future is vast. One minute from now, a giant meteorite could come screaming through the sky and Ciao, humanity! You can believe in the likelihood of something happening, but unless we're talking about the supernatural, it is impossible to actuallybelieve in it. The projection of a future result from any human project—Pilot TV, The Chicago Arts District, Brook Farm, or the settling of the New World—can't be a myth, then: it can be faith, and hope, which are easily (and I'd argue wrongly) knocked.

The gap in belief only matters if you privilege the present, as Sorel does, in the letter Daniel referred to. If you're judging a myth merely on its "motivating action in the present," you're narrowing the gloriously broad scope of human inducements to act. Novelists breathe motivation; no motivation is ever simple. One acts in the present as a corrective to the past; think of a murderer repenting in a grand catharsis, and afterwards living a saintly life. One acts in the present in order torewrite history, to whitewash over what has happened. One acts in the present to change the future, and I would say that is the most urgent impetus of all. The Farm, an intentional community in Tennessee, never ceases to fascinate me, and one of their current projects is the Ecovillage Training Center, where they teach people about permaculture,

which is how to live in the present so that the future isn't harmed. Those of us with children, for whom a future world must exist without us, can't fail to live with our lives spread in the past, the present, and the future all at once.

Every project that humanity has embarked upon to change the future has been fueled by faith and hope; otherwise, nobody would have attempted them. A project is only ever called "utopian" if it fails; if it succeeds, we praise the project's architects for their vision.

**PANELIST**
**Pablo Helguera**

Thanks, Daniel, for starting with such an interesting angle. In order to address your question, I think it's important to consider the different circumstances of the two examples you mention. The first is an artists' collective that, based on your description, invoked potentiality—it stimulated the imagination of a group of people and prompted them to action. The work, in the Agambean sense of its actualization, retained its potentiality (that of one day becoming a real program), which is a wonderful thing; communities usually come together with a sense of hopefulness. In the case of Pilot TV, this was, arguably, the desire to find a forum for the creation of a communal representation.

By contrast, the developer, who I assume was not an artist, and who concocted or imagined a possible audience that never materialized in that "arts district," probably suffered from—to use Benedict Anderson's term—"imagined communities" syndrome, that is, the attempt to create economic and social conditions for an urban grouping that either didn't exist, or which didn't identify with or see a place for themselves in that district.

I think it is no coincidence that the first example is one of a project instigated by artists, who employed a somewhat mischievous but ultimately effective strategy to create a community, while the developer seemingly pursues a project in a much less imaginative way. This seems to justify the idea that, whether you want to call it fiction, myth-making, or the insertion of the carnivalesque, art allows one to create what I would describe as social parentheses—events or situations that produce communities.

But there is another absolutely key, and perhaps more important, component here than the ability to communicate a vision of what could be: the ability to know your audience. This is a talent, or a skill, at which both artists and marketers excel. Even when it is denied—I have always found the claim that some artists make that they don't have an audience in mind when they make art to be disingenuous—everything we do has an implicit public. Is this someone who likes art? Is it someone who holds the same values as us? Who speaks the same language? Furthermore, these projects tend to be most successful when we are in tune with the language, the interests, and the idiosyncrasies of that audience. I would argue that while myth-making and any other strategy of the sort can be effective in helping to construct a sense of community, this can all fall flat if one lacks a sense—via intuition or research—of simply what is of interest to a group of people.

**PANELIST**
**Stevphen Shukaitis**

Daniel's opening comments put me in mind of that noted theorist of the aesthetics of alternative community, John Wayne, and a line from the 1962 film [The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance](). Toward the end of the film, there is discussion with a newspaper reporter about the real causes of Liberty's death (which differ from the public account). But the reporter ends up deciding to burn his notes rather then publish what he discovers, his now notorious conclusion: "When the legend becomes fact, print the legend."

It's interesting to start from such a film precisely because while myth may well underpin alternative forms of community and political art practice, it certainly doesn't do so only within such milieus. The ways in which mythic claims act as foundations, underpinning and making possible the construction of a community, extend far beyond the intersection and art and politics. This is the argument that Derrida makes in his essay ["Force of Law"]()—that any revolutionary government setting out a new constitutional arrangement does so only on the basis of projecting backwards in time a mythic foundation for its claim to the requisite legitimacy. Thus for Derrida the foundation of all authority is mystical—or as we might prefer to say here, mythical.

The question for me then becomes, what could distinguish the myth-making practices of radical social and artistic movements from those that are at the core of constitutional law and political history? A way in which I might start to make such a distinction would be to look back to the ideas and practices of the Situationists, whose influence far exceeded what one might reasonably expect of a relatively small bunch of avant-garde troublemakers scattered throughout Europe. It did this precisely not just because of their keen agility at mythmaking (both about themselves, and around events and uprisings against spectacular-commodity society that were already occurring), but also because of the way in which they claimed not to be inventing anything new, but rather to be working from existing popular ideas. The SI's myth-making thus extended the potentials of forms of social action that were already occurring.

One could also look at the mythopoetic practices of the Polish underground in the 1980s, such as surrealist send-ups of the Soviet regime by the [Orange Alternative](), which saw participants dress as dwarves or hold mass events purportedly in honor of Stalin. These actions were doubly troubling for state authorities precisely because everyone knew that they were designed to satirize the state but did not present themselves as such. They demonstrate the principle that Jeffrey Goldfarb distils from the period in his essay ["1989 and the Creativity of the Political"](), that if one acts as if one is already free, one is helping to create the conditions for the realization of that freedom. This thinking connects very clearly to the way in which David Graeber describes the logic of direct action protests in his book Direct Action: An Ethnographynot as militant petition, but as a way of positioning the mechanisms of the state as irrelevant—though that framing may be somewhat mythic in itself.

What distinguishes the use of myth in the formation of alternative communities and artistic practices today is these groupings enact what one could call, to borrow from Stephen Duncombe's book [Dream: Re-imagining Progressive Politics in an Age of Fantasy]() "ethical myth-making." Duncombe develops the notion of an "ethical spectacle" by looking at manifestations of political protest, such as Billionaires for Bush, that attempt, in a self-conscious style, to puncture the mythologies of contemporary capitalism, but in a self-conscious style. Thus they are different from the reporter who knows the truth about the death of

Liberty but chooses to conceal it. Ethical myth-making undercuts dominant mythologies at the same time as wagering on the possibility of a community to come—but one that is only possible through the circulation of the mythic claim itself.

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**MODERATOR**
**Daniel Tucker**
In this session, I'd like to continue with Lauren's discussion of belief, and the role it plays in allowing for some dreams to come true, while others lie fallow.

In her 1971 novel, The Lathe of Heaven, Ursula Le Guin introduces a protagonist who can dream worlds into being in his sleep. His every dream comes true, and only he remembers the dual version of reality, while everyone else unknowingly accepts it as unique and unchanged. One day the world is home to seven billion people, the next there are less than one billion, simply because he dreams of feeling less cramped. In Jack Vance's novelette Rumfuddle (1973) the main character invents time-space travel, allowing everyone to maintain an alternate wilderness retreat, devoid of neighbors, called Home. In the same year, cultural critic Raymond Williams tried to debunk the dichotomous relationship between urban and rural perpetuated in literature in his book The Country And the City, yet the commitment to their separation runs very deep.

The dream of having control over one's surroundings is a perennial theme in the visions of actually existing alternative lifestyles, from the religious and socialist intentional communities of the 19th century to the self-sufficient communes of the mid-20th. Early back-to-the-land advocates Helen and Scott Nearing influenced generations of people looking for "the good life" away from urban consumption-intensive living. After leaving New York City during the Great Depression, the Nearings placed great emphasis on the aesthetic dimension of a simpler lifestyle, from the siting of their homestead in a place that allowed for close observation of the passing seasons to the daily organization of their tools and their adaptation of building projects to both the health of the environment and the needs of the inhabitants.

The dream of "self sufficiency" often conjures up an aesthetic along the lines of the "handmade" commune. But there are many versions of this dream across the ideological spectrum. Controversial American political pundit Charles Murray put forth his vision for less government in part through an aesthetic critique: "The reality of daily life is that, by and large, the things the government does tend to be ugly, rude, slovenly—and not to work. Things that private organizations do tend to be attractive, courteous, tidy—and to work." While on the campaign trail in 1967, Ronald Reagan toured California touting his dream of a "creative society" that would replace Lyndon Johnson's Great Society. He explained that this was not a retreat into the past, but an update of the "dream that gave birth to this nation"—that is, one of smaller government.

Last session, Stevphen described the unethical myth and Pablo cited the concept of imagined communities—both of which are regarded as disingenuous. But among the many competing dreams about

the kind of world we might live in, cynical or not, some are attached to significant concentrations of power while others remain marginal and that makes a difference in their influence. There are those who dream up visions of the world, like Reagan's and Murray's, which become realities that we all have to live with and within. Then there are those such as the Nearings (and their many inspired followers), whose dreams prefigure the world as they would have it, but only for themselves and their immediate circles. Then there are science-fiction authors like Le Guin and Vance who envision social structures that never leave the pages of their books.

To continue our discussion, I wonder what thoughts panelists might have on the aesthetic dimensions of envisioning utopia, and on "dream worlds" that we actually have to live in versus those that we can read about, but which remain elusive?

**PANELIST**
**Lauren Groff**

"The mind is its own place and in itself/ Can make a heav'n of hell, a hell of heav'n." [254–255] One of the most seductive characters ever written said this, in what is arguably the greatest poem in the English language, John Milton's Paradise Lost. It is germane that the character speaking is Satan, the apostate angel, and that his greatest sin is pride. In heaven, Satan chafes under God's rule. He rises up in arms and is cast out of heaven into hell, where, calling his minions to him, in the space of an hour wrests gold from the ground and pours it into a temple-like "Fabrick huge," which:

Rose like an Exhalation, with the sound
Of Dulcet Symphonies and voices sweet,
Built like a Temple, where Pilasters round
Were set, and Doric pillars overlaid
With Golden Architrave; nor did there want
Cornice or Freeze, with bossy Sculptures grav'n,
The Roof was fretted Gold. [711–717]

Satan makes his internal vision of a heaven in hell into an external and literal vision, all in fewer than five hundred lines. He is the original idealist whose utopian uprising failed; he's the artist whose idea for a dwelling goes from concept to what Milton describes as a profoundly aesthetically pleasing creation. In the first book of Paradise Lost, Satan's thoughts and actions are implying two kinds of reality: there's the world of the mind, which can make our external situation into the hell it may not actually be, but also alleviate the pain of a terrible time and place, and there's the physical world that the fallen cherubim and demi-gods and angels work to make more beautiful.

The visions of utopia that Daniel discusses play with different calibrations of these entwined worlds, the world of the mind and the world of external existence. Science-fiction writers, at least the ones I trust and love like Ursula Le Guin, don't believe that what they are representing on the page is going to come literally true; if they seek any influence it is a metaphorical influence, or an influence of thought and emotion which can lead people to make different decisions. Closer, perhaps, to the material world are books that are perhaps fictional in creation but that have a polemical bite: Plato's Republic, Sir Thomas More's Utopia, William Morris's News From Nowhere. These have the potential to have more of an ability to sway actual policy in the time in which they were written. And then there are the world-builders

like the Nearings, whose aesthetic response to utopian urges is to take what is internal—thoughts of ameliorating the present and influencing the future, an understanding of the past—and turning it all directly upon the material world. Their actions can sometimes spread outward and double back unexpectedly into the internal aesthetic; I read a lot about the Nearings and saw a wonderful photographic exhibition about them in Vermont, and they had a direct influence upon my own fiction, which is never meant to directly influence action.

But return again to Milton, the man. For most of his life, the poet was an influential and famous political polemicist and defender of Oliver Cromwell's Commonwealth: he wrote to accomplish his aims. By his mid-forties, however, he was almost totally blind and impoverished. He'd had to compose Paradise Lost in his head, then recite it to his amanuenses who would then write it down. The poem is commonly read as an extended metaphor for the failed revolution, Satan standing in for Cromwell. In that sense, the visions of Eden in the poem can be read as a lament. I think of Milton, blind, isolated, looking backwards at what could have been, having turned away from the forward propulsion of pamphleteering and towering political pride, and toward the subtler dream-building of art.

**PANELIST**
**Pablo Helguera**
I agree with Daniel that dreaming and conjuring up possible worlds is inextricable from the artistic process. At the most basic level, artists produce proposals for seeing our reality in a different or new light that may have an impact on how we view ourselves, and which may push us to act. However, I think it is important to remember that, historically, the relationship between artists and dreams has as much to do with imagining new possible worlds as it does with escapism—that is, with imagining impossible worlds to inhabit in order to avoid the real one. So while dreamers can be visionaries, they can also be, well, simply dreamers.

Out of this distinction emerges what I think has been one of the main debates around contemporary practice over the past decade or so. This revolves around the question of whether art is meant to be a reflective practice or one that also aspires to—and is measured against—the agency it creates. This is essentially a political debate, and one that isn't new, having emerged sporadically in the 1930s (think social realism), and recurred throughout the '60s, '70s and '80s. The current version pits socially engaged art against art inclined more toward symbolic representation and the production of objects.

It is hard to pin down the exact moment when this debate emerged, but I always have seen it as post-9/11, and as a response to the dominance of relational aesthetics. Utopia Station, curated by Molly Nesbit, Hans-Ulrich Obrist, and Rirkrit Tiravanija at the 2003 Venice Biennial, was a great project but may have been a tipping point into "utopia exhaustion." Around this time, many artists were beginning to understand that we were not interested in simply imagining utopian scenarios, but in actually going out into the world and attempting to realize them. Aesthetically, the changing of the terms of the debate has to do with the fact that social practice does not attempt merely to illustrate a problem, but actually to make a verifiable impact on individuals and communities—and claim that impact as a key part of the artwork.

The usual criticism of this position ([recently summarized by critic Ben Davis in International Socialist Review](#)) focuses on whether this aspiration to change the world is just more dreaming—but a kind of dreaming that is unacknowledged, as well as vainglorious and self-righteous. I think that the debate (as usually happens with debates) tends to caricature opposing sides and not appreciate, for example, interesting artistic projects that do manage to create agency. But to restrict myself to the question at hand, I think we now realize the limitations of mere utopian spirit and understand that art should be functioning differently than it used to, but we can't yet figure out how to reconcile that knowledge with our creative heritage.

**PANELIST**
**Stevphen Shukaitis**
Daniel raises some interesting questions about the nature of utopia, which is something near and dear to me. While this might seem like rather a banal statement, I tend to think of utopia more as a process than as a fixed goal or end. This is an important distinction, precisely because of the way that utopian political thought has fallen into disrepute and been accused of underpinning various totalitarian attempts to rework society during the 20th century. The framing of utopia as a process might represent one way out of this difficulty. In this sense, utopian goals that are unrealistic or even batshit crazy can be helpful precisely because they rupture the idea that we necessarily need to achieve and maintain them—their true value then is that which is produced while working toward them. Thus utopian thought can become a guide to the process of development, a space of otherness to the world as it exists, but not an obsession.

One of my first published essays was ["An Ethnography of Nowhere."](#) This text represented an attempt to renew, in a specific way, utopian political thought and analysis within the anarchist milieu. What it suggested was that the best way to approach utopia was not to create unworkable plans, but rather to seek out existing forms of cooperative practice and utopian experimentation, and to find ways to generalize their logic on larger scales. This idea grounds utopian thought and politics in the materialities of cooperative practice. Thus an ethnography of utopia would be the study of the nowhere that is now here—there is no existing utopia in which to conduct fieldwork, yet there are always utopian worlds within the existing diversity of cooperative practices.

I would make a similar argument for thinking about the aesthetics of utopia. The idea would not be to attempt the projection of a utopian world through aesthetic practices, even though there continues to be value in doing so. Nor would it necessarily be to presume that any aesthetic practice could be utopian in and of itself (as opposed to becoming so through emergence from and engagement with its context). Rather, it would be to look at the participation of aesthetics in the guiding, shaping, cohering, and articulating of existing utopian practices. While aesthetic utopian practices do not necessarily correspond with artistic ones, they often do. This strikes me as the particular value of hanging on to art as a space for experimentation, precisely because it can help to enable forms of social interaction that are not necessarily bound by the calculations of effectiveness usually demanded of political action. Aesthetic "utopistics" can help maintain a space of indeterminacy even while working toward political and social transformation.

SESSION 3

**MODERATOR**
**Daniel Tucker**
In the last session, all the panelists seemed to consider the concept of the prefigurative. The prefigurative, or the practice of embodying the change that you want to see in the world at large, suggests that we don't have to overthrow a system all at once in order to change our lives. As anarchist activist Cindy Milstein writes, "there should be an ethically consistent relationship between the means and ends . . . [one should align] one's values to one's practice and practice the new society before it is fully in place."
The relatively large-scale social experiment of the Occupy movement involved decision-making through consensus, which activated and reclaimed public space while articulating a critique of the authority that had choked their life and prosperity. The past decade's expressions of popular outrage in the United States have birthed a wide variety of calls for autonomy. These are exemplified by the increased popularity of localized food economies, the Tea Party's emphasis on small government, and Occupy Wall Street's protests against mass alienation from economic and political processes. Given the increased prominence of these ideas and movements, it's necessary to not only trace their development, but also to navigate their sometimes-contradictory complexities.

Prominent Democratic congressional representative Tip O'Neill famously stated: "all politics is local." This sentiment, in its generality, points to a pragmatic concern with scale, one that has recently joined with the experience of being transient and "multi-centered" (as Lucy Lippard dubbed it in her book The Lure of the Local: Senses of Place in a Multicentered Society) to such a degree that it has, in the words of sociologist Richard Sennett, "strengthened the value of place, aroused a longing for community."

Local scale is also related to autonomy. This is why the Black Power movement of the 1960s and '70s was so concerned with maintaining land on which black people might live and work. In his "Black Manifesto," community organizer James Forman called for "the establishment of a Southern land bank to help our brothers and sisters, who have to leave their land because of racist pressure, who want to establish cooperative farms." While the reparations funds to support such an effort were never granted, movements such as the Republic of New Afrika and Federation of Southern Cooperatives have taken up such projects. The concept has also found a counterpoint in the cartographic projections of white supremacist leaders like David Duke, who would like nothing more than for African Americans and all other non-white racial and ethnic groupings to claim a territory and split into segregated bastions. Such projects reveal that the claims on local control are truly diverse.

The most prominent arguments for localism today come from sources that downplay their position on the ideological spectrum. On the economic side, there are claims around the multiplier effect or dollar cycle made by Buy Local campaigns and groups like American Independent Business Alliance and Civic Economics. These studies advocate that independent business people reinvest their money locally on a greater scale than non-local chain stores do. Additionally, the craze for locally sourced food pairs a similar economic argument with concerns over the non-renewable energy expended in food distribution. Movement figurehead Michael Pollan also emphasizes the health benefits, claiming "To shop at a farmers' market or sign up with a CSA [Community Supported Agriculture] is to join a short food chain and that has several implications for your health. Local produce is typically picked ripe and is fresher than

supermarket produce, and for those reasons it should be tastier and more nutritious. As for supermarket organic produce, it too is likely to have come from far away—from the industrial organic farms of California or, increasingly, China."

In a recent interview, labor organizer and lawyer Staughton Lynd offered a warning: "Countless small prefigurative experiments are launched within the belly of the capitalist beast. Most fail. Those that survive tend to be transformed into replicas of that which they initially opposed." The boom in localism and prefigurative practices suggest that changing the world can happen one experiment at a time. But despite my sympathy for these impulses, I don't know that this is really the case. By 1847, Freidrich Engels was already decrying the limits of these micro-utopian processes: "By creating the world market, big industry has already brought all the peoples of the Earth, and especially the civilized peoples, into such close relation with one another that none is independent of what happens to the others."
In the face of this complexity, what might be the role of localist community experiments?

**PANELIST**
**Lauren Groff**
I'd like to spin off from what Daniel says when he writes, "The boom in localism and prefigurative practices suggest that changing the world can happen one experiment at a time. But despite my sympathy for these impulses, I don't know that this is really the case." I'm probably reading too much of a dichotomy into this phrase (we do have limited space to pose our questions, and Daniel is a subtle thinker), but I resist the implied opposition between localism and prefigurative practices and the grand human interdependence that, in the later quote, Engels asserts is the result of big industry. I don't believe that local-level prefiguration and worldwide interdependence are mutually exclusive. Instead of looking at localism and globalism as engines for the zeitgeist, perhaps one can take the view that both are emanations of it. They are symptoms of the movement of the larger culture, rather than the underlying cause.

With this view in mind, it's hard not to use the metaphor of human society as virus. Not in the sense that we are akin to a virus that is attacking and killing its host—pollution, fracking, brazen deforestation, human-induced desertification, great trash gyres in the oceans—though I believe this particular likening is a useful figure of speech because it hits you in the gut and inspires the kind of fear that moves people to change. I mean, here, that human society is like a virus in the way that a virus is made of discrete molecules that together create a larger movement. Microbiologist André Michel Lwoff drew this metaphor in his 1965 Nobel Lecture: "Social order is opposed to revolution, which is an abrupt change of order, and to anarchy, which is the absence of order . . . anarchy cannot survive and prosper except in an ordered society, and revolution becomes sooner or later the new order. Viruses have not failed to follow the general law. They are strict parasites which, born of disorder, have created a very remarkable new order to ensure their own perpetuation." Virus molecules work individually and together to advance their aim. Human society does as well.

When it comes to social experiments, the 20th century stands as a clear reminder that large-scale revolution often has disastrous results to individual cultures within the larger ones. Society-wide revolutions almost inevitably gave rise to genocides, from the Chinese Civil War (an estimated 7.5

million casualties) to the Nazi-led Holocaust (about 11.5 million casualties) to the Rwandan Civil War (the ensuing genocide took 500,000 to 1 million casualties). Large-scale revolutions are the fastest way to create change, for sure; small, local prefiguration efforts look almost pathetically slow and feeble in comparison. The aims are much lower. But, well, their body counts are, too. We are so deeply connected now—and are getting even more so via the Internet, a vast fishing net that has scooped up all we little fish and squeezed us intimately close to one another—that the ideas behind local efforts spread swiftly on a macro level and can give rise to thousands of other local-level efforts that, together, create a much larger utopian project. Ideas can be viruses, too.

**PANELIST**
**Pablo Helguera**
Thank you, Daniel, for raising such thoughtful questions, all of which—especially this latest one—have pointed toward important and sometimes painful realities connected to community experiments. The criticism that most of these projects are bound to fail is one of the most familiar, shadowing the homily "change begins at home." However, I would like to question this pair of received ideas. First, if all these experiments are doomed, what exactly constitutes failure? Or success? If we examine things historically, we can dub many important political and social movements failures, including those whose ideas substantially altered our thinking and behavior. So we need to examine first the parameters that we're using to determine a project's value.

One of the problems is that in a cause-and-effect approach to the study of certain movements, we can determine all-too-quickly that, for instance, a given political event had "no meaningful impact." The Occupy movement is a case in point. Did it eradicate banking corruption? No, but since the movement never stated its goals, can we say it failed overall? Conversely, did Occupy have an impact on the U.S. presidential election? And did it prepare the ground for the election of a progressive New York City mayor? There are no straightforward answers; the point is that we should avoid rushing to judgment. Maybe we need to move beyond the Manichean failure/success grading system altogether and focus on how to trace and study both short-term and long-term outcomes.

The problem with the idea that all politics is local resides not in its truth or falsity, but rather in its shortsightedness. The motto is frequently applied in the sense of politics ending at home; you can do composting or be a "slacktivist" and feel that you have fulfilled your responsibilities as a citizen—thus the criticism of the idea as promoting a provincial activism that's easily disconnected from real but hard-to-visualize issues in the world.

In the context of contemporary art practice, the failure/success and local/global axes feel particularly inappropriate. This is not to say that we can't determine with a fair degree of certainty when a purportedly "socially engaged" project is misconceived or poorly executed; I'm referring to an assessment of the degree to which a project of this kind has a verifiable social impact. Take the Yes Men's activist tactics. We could argue that they haven't stopped corporate misbehavior, but would we really characterize their interventions as failures? The art world is so interconnected that a "local" project may have immediate effect in another place, however remote, as soon as people there learn about it and can apply it in their own context. As an educator, I believe strongly believe in this potentiality. Artists, like educators, can

make patterns of communication and exchange that are easily relatable, adaptable, and translatable into local realities. Yes, politics is local, but it fails when there is a lack of global awareness. Art can help us attain that larger consciousness.

**PANELIST**
**Stevphen Shukaitis**
I'd like to focus my last set of comments on the currently fashionable idea of openness—the notion that projects, spaces, and politics should be as open as possible. While I can see the appeal here, it makes me wonder, "open" in what sense? Open to whom and for what purpose?

This leads me to a few questions and thoughts about the meaning and nature of openness in alternative art and politics. What is an open project or practice? What kinds of social relationships does it support, and what kinds does it work to prevent? How can it serve to further, say, the sociality in publishing argued for by André Breton? One interesting—if, admittedly, slightly strange—way to think through these kinds of questions might be to turn to philosopher Giorgio Agamben's commentary on biologist Jakob Johann von Uexküll's research on ticks. As Uexküll describes the tick, it is completely open to the world, but this openness is constituted in a rather limited fashion: namely, the capacity to sense the movement of warm-blooded mammals from which it can derive nourishment. This version of the open is clearly very far from its definition as the unlimited capacity for becoming and transformation; it is simply the organism's capacity to interact with its particular world. But it is not true to say the tick is not open the world; it is as open as can be.

Those practitioners of alternative art and politics that would like to think of themselves as open thus need to work through this question: What is the nature of the supposed openness produced through the social relationships of art and cultural production that we currently find ourselves engaged in? (The scale of a project is based on the degree to which it is embedded within a supporting and supported social world, but growth is not necessarily a positive dynamic.) This question cannot be answered by looking at projects in and of themselves. Rather, it is a question of social ecologies, wherein print politics, for example, are embedded within larger ecologies of production, circulation, and distribution. It is not only a question of identifying the best way to organize cultural production (though that is an important task), but also one of determining the best ways to organize the publics and "undercommons" that are articulated through autonomous cultural production.

Live Chat
On 4/10 for a one-hour session online.

WRAP-UP

**MODERATOR**
**Daniel Tucker**
Thoroughly impressed by the breadth of reference introduced in the last three sessions, I struggle to synthesize it at all. The key concepts I tried to introduce were: constituting community; dreaming of community; and the scale of community. We took these ideas in a wild variety of directions, and I have to really offer my thanks to Lauren, Pablo, and Stevphen for their generosity of engagement, thinking, and

writing. While I'm at it, thanks also go to Michael, Maria, and the rest of the Guggenheim team for their invitation, framing, and support. I hope we can continue the conversation.

In the live chat, several commenters pointed to the limitation of the entire premise and rhetoric of "community." While it seems awkward to conclude the Forum by problematizing its premise, I hope our drift through a diverse range of ideas treated the premise critically and also constructively. This concern with the vague and uncertain aspects of community reminds me of a text from a few years ago by Colectivo Situaciones, the brilliant Argentine collective oriented around extra-disciplinary and extra-institutional research in the service of social movements. In their [epilogue to Raúl Zibechi's book Dispersing Power](), they write, "Community, then, deserves new attention, not as an eccentric¬ity of the past that resists dying, but as a dynamic of both common production and common association with overwhelming political relevance, although it is as plagued with ambivalence as it is vital. Thinking about community means conceiving its real dynamic: moving, clearly, but also detaining and metastasizing."

Towards the end of the live chat, Dan S. Wang, an artist from Madison, Wisconsin, asked the simple question "How are communities different from or related to networks?" The theme of online sociality recurred throughout the week, from the Guggenheim's initial prompt to the live chat, to Lauren's vivid image of the Internet as "a vast fishing net that has scooped up all we little fish" from session three. While my short answer to Wang's question was "I think that networks are forms and communities are affective—much less formal," I would add that the network tends to be centered on the individual (every person has a network-shaped universe organized around their own connection points), while community is usefully ambiguous in its formlessness. The Internet, which is both blamed for social fragmentation and praised for social connectivity, tends to be concomitant with the network form for obvious technical reasons. And while there is undoubtedly a freedom that comes with being able to connect socially with anyone, there is also a responsibility to transverse the network and politicize that connectivity when solidarity is needed. The sticking point is that solidarity works best with a bond that goes deeper than the connection points allowed by the network's form. This reintroduces the necessity of community as an emotional terrain that also harbors power with, as Colectivo Situaciones articulated it, "overwhelming political relevance."

As we draw this inquiry into the nature of the aspiration that is community to a close, Colectivo Situaciones's emphasis on movement offers a useful way to engage with the ambiguities that result from the term's external imposition (as opposed to its use in the context of common cultural practices or other shared terrain). A moving target, community is not a form to grab onto, as it is often in the process of dispersal. But it signals an association that we desperately need, both to celebrate our commonality, and to articulate our common struggles.

Come together now!

Lauren Groff
Lauren Groff is the author of the novels Arcadia, shortlisted for the L.A. Times Prize for Fiction, andThe Monsters of Templeton. Her stories have been appeared in many journals and anthologies, including the New Yorker, the Atlantic Monthly and multiple Best American Short Stories. She lives in Gainesville, Florida.

Pablo Helguera
Pablo Helguera is a New York-based artist and writer. He is Director of Adult and Academic Programs at the Museum of Modern Art, and the author of The Pablo Helguera Manual of Contemporary Art Style (2005), The Boy Inside the Letter (2007), Education for Socially Engaged Art(2011), and Art Scenes (2012).

Stevphen Shukaitis
Stevphen Shukaitis is an editor at Autonomedia and lecturer at the University of Essex, United Kingdom. He is the author of Imaginal Machines: Autonomy & Self-Organization in the Revolutions of Everyday Life (2009) and editor (with Erika Biddle and David Graeber) of Constituent Imagination: Militant Investigations / Collective Theorization (2007).

Daniel Tucker
Moderator Daniel Tucker is a Chicago-based artist, writer, and organizer. He works on the Never The Same oral history and archive project with Rebecca Zorach, and is currently editing the book Immersive Life Practices, and producing a video/writing project about self-sufficiency and the right-wing imagination while in residence at Grand Central Art Center.