Neal Beggs: The Politics of the Fall

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For three days in March 2007, the inhabitants of Brussels negotiated a climbable public sculpture by British artist Neal Beggs, titled *Dear Prudence*. The sculpture was commissioned by the city and installed in the center of the Place Royale near major civic, religious, and cultural institutions [Fig. 1]. The public plaza provided a backdrop for a work of art that modified extant theories of participatory practice by drawing together two supposedly incompatible yet synchronous techniques: first, the avant-garde technique of 'activating' the observing subject through physical action; and second, the affirmation of spectatorship as the 'active' appropriation of a text through the process of creative interpretation.[1] *Dear Prudence* deploys both techniques in the space of a single work - a somewhat ironic turn in participatory practice that signals the increasing significance of Jacques Rancière's concept of 'emancipated' spectatorship, while reasserting the relevance of the constructed situation in the context of urban space, especially where play is conceived as a direct means to participation.[2]

To this end, *Dear Prudence* simulates a real physical locale, the pyramidal upper elevation of the Matterhorn, grafting it onto the slightly elevated topography of Brussels' Mont des Arts. It can be seen as an act of *détournement* reminiscent of the Situationist International, while also offering up for collective interpretation one of the mountain's most spectacular literary representations: Edward Whymper's *Scrambles Amongst the Alps* (1871). Thus, by transposing a fragmentary image of the Swiss landscape—known to most Europeans only through mediated formats like lithography, photography, and mountaineering narrative—into the urban environment, *Dear Prudence* exposes the reciprocal relationship in nineteenth-century British culture between individual mountaineers seeking adventure in the wilderness and a mass audience of mostly urban dwellers avidly consuming and interpreting narratives and images produced by mountaineers. Yet, *Dear Prudence* does more than simply expose nineteenth-century oppositions between urban and rural, individual and collective, practitioner and observer. The project reinscribes these oppositions within contemporary discourses of participation by connecting the collective interpretation of texts to the urban dweller's critical engagement with architecture and public space. *Dear Prudence*, therefore, references the 'textures' of the Matterhorn and the text of its most notorious literary representation as a means of re-reading the public spaces of Brussels and the notions of community these spaces represent. This technique underscores the slippage in avant-garde practices between semiological investigations of urban space or its representations; embodied experiences of urban 'textures' through such

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Fig. 1. Neal Beggs. *Dear Prudence*, Brussels, 2007 (southeast view). Mixed media construction. Courtesy of Michel van Reysen, Brussels, Belgium.

techniques as the *dérive*; and the tendency to regard the act of reading as "drift", "wandering", or "a wild orchestration of the body."[3] Such practices define a critical space I term *textu(r)ality*, and which, in the arts context, might be traced to such works as Guy Debord and Asger Jorn's *Mémoires* (1959). An artist-produced book containing accounts of Parisian *derives, Mémoires*' blank sandpaper binding has the double effect of erasing the authorship of its creators and recalling the textures of the modern urban environment.[4]

By shifting the practice of mountaineering into the urban landscape, *Dear Prudence* extends the relatively recent concept of the "performative critique of the city", developed by architectural historian Iain Borden in his studies of skateboarding culture, to include such established practices as alpinism and bouldering, as well as lesser-known practices like 'buildering'—the illegal sport of climbing on architecture, believed to have originated in nineteenth-century Cambridge.[5] *Dear Prudence* levels its critique of urban space directly at the Place Royale, a heavily trafficked tourist destination located near the Royal Museum of Fine Arts, the Royal Palace, and the Belgian Parliament. Designed in 1769 by architect Bernabé Guimard, the plaza offers direct lines of site to major features of the city, such as the Brussels Town Hall to the east and the Palace of Justice to the southwest. In the center of the plaza, standing on a high pedestal in front of the church of St-Jacques-cur-Coudenberg, the monumental equestrian statue of crusader Godefroid de Bouillon by Louis Eugene Simonis (1810-1893) commands a view of the Grand Place to the northwest. The added elevation of *Dear Prudence*, therefore, underscores the plaza's historical associations with state power and the semantic connections between the elevation of Mont des Arts, panopticism, dominance, and monumentality. In contrast to the opulence of the plaza and the permanence of the architecture, *Dear Prudence* is a nomadic construction composed of prefabricated materials and found objects.

In the absence of any signage attributing authorship, or a declaration marking it as a work of participatory art, *Dear Prudence* issues an explicit invitation to engage physically with the structure through a text which is mounted in relief across the plywood cladding: "CLIMB IF YOU WANT BUT REMEMBER THAT COURAGE AND STRENGTH ARE NOTHING WITHOUT PRUDENCE." The text continues on the reverse side of the work: "AND PRUDENCE IS NOTHING WITHOUT A LITTLE COURAGE." Those willing to risk injury or humiliation must ascend a series of small footholds perforating the lower register to gain the upper register where the letters of the text, varying in depth from 4 – 18 mm, offer a stratum of handholds that decreases in difficulty near the summit. A ladder mounted to the back of the work allows direct access to the viewing platform, and the jumble of mattresses at the base offers minimal protection in the event of a fall.

It is this particular event—the moment of the fall—which *Dear Prudence* seeks to replicate through the participant's repeated attempts to gain the viewing platform and the privileged view of the city that this elevation affords. As such, the work parodies the social dynamics of modern alpinism, characterized by the vicissitude between participation and spectatorship as it plays out in mountaineering narrative. As the primary means by which the supposedly 'active' climber communicates with an otherwise sedentary public, mountaineering narrative provides a structure on which the social dynamics of the sculpture is based. Within this narrative architecture, *Dear Prudence* exposes

what I shall refer to as the *politics of the fall*—or the capacity of the fall and the resulting death of the climber to convey social meanings about a perceived threat to community that this loss represents. This is achieved by activating the causal link in mountaineering narrative between falling and death, and by presenting the event of the fall as a focal point for a constructed conviviality in which participants experience the simulated 'loss' of their fellow climbers.

Rather than attempting to reconcile the hierarchical relationship between active and passive participants through the affirmation of spectator agency, a hierarchy based on avant-garde assumptions of subjectivity, *Dear Prudence* repositions the issue of spectatorship as it is discussed in the art context within contemporary discourses of community. The fall, therefore, when seen in terms of loss or death, reveals what Jean-Luc Nancy describes as a condition of "being-in-common," a radically reconfigured view of community that rejects the possibility of a community of autonomous individual beings, identified as the "inoperative community."[6] Introducing the issue of spectatorship to the discourse of community in the context of mountaineering culture suggests a more complex model of community than that of the "inoperative community" proposed by Nancy, which only partially accounts for the role of the viewer in the event of death. This allows the work to comment on some of the most ineffable and controversial aspects of modern mountaineering culture and allows it to enter into a dialogue with an urban space dominated by traditional public monuments and institutions. What *Dear Prudence* offers is an alternative modality of public art practice that shifts agency from states and institutions to an inoperative community of singularities, with the capacity to commune with one another through narrative and the collective interpretation of urban space.

Initiating the work's participation in the politics of the fall is the text, "CLIMB IF YOU WILL...", which, those familiar with mountaineering lore will recognize as one of the most cited passages in *Scrambles Amongst the Alps* (1871). Penned by British mountaineer Edward Whymper (1840-1911) several years after his first ascent of the Matterhorn in July 1865, the book was written partly in response to public outcries over the controversial deaths of four expedition members who fell during the descent [Fig. 2]. Much of

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Fig. 2. Gustave Doré. *The Ascent of the Matterhorn, July 14th, 1865, The Fall*, c. 1865. Lithograph. Courtesy of the Audrey Salkeld Collection.

the controversy stemmed from Whymper's use of inferior equipment: the fall may not have proved fatal had the rope connecting the four men to the other members of the party not broken under the load, as noted in the illustration by Gustave Doré.[7] The passage was written as an admonition against what was perceived by the public as the unbridled hubris infecting British climbers during the period known as the Golden Age of Mountaineering from 1854-1865.[8] The full citation reads:

> Climb if you will but remember, that courage and strength are naught without prudence, and that a momentary negligence may destroy the happiness of a lifetime. Do nothing in haste, look well to each step and from the beginning think what may be the end.[9]

Interpreted by the public as a direct result of hubris, the tragedy forced Whymper to accept responsibility for the disaster and help conservative critics within British culture stem the flow of young men who went to their deaths in the mountains.[10]

Certain critics regarded the tragedy, and mountaineering death generally, as a meaningless waste of human potential and as a direct and immediate threat to the health of the community, emblematized in Victorian Britain by the reproductive capacities of the social elite. Critics described death in distinctly biological or somatic terms, implying that the "best blood of England" spilt in the mountains represented a loss of social as well as racial superiority.[11] One critic makes the theme of reproduction explicit when he writes, "It is by no means uncertain that a member of the Alpine Club will not endeavor to surmount a 'virgin peak' of some wondrous mountain in the year 1875 and render a family heirless and a mother unhappy for life."[12] Death in the mountains was interpreted literally as the castration of the society's ability to continue the bloodlines of its elite citizens, and as a threat to the traditional social roles imposed by domesticity, such as that of the husband, father, or son. In the British imagination, blood mixes with precious semen, and the breaking of the rope signifies the interruption of the controlled flow of bodily fluids between citizens. This view presupposes the infrangibility of social bonds between individuals, a notion of community that the politics of the fall tends to destabilize.

Within the politics of the fall, the disappearance or absence of the fallen body presents an additional set of anxieties, based on the idea that the deceased climber had been denied a proper Christian burial. According to Whymper's account of the descent, his fellow survivors were so distraught by the loss of their companions that they were beset by the "spectral forms" of the deceased, who appeared in the mists as ghostly crucifixes.[13] Additionally, when the body of the young British aristocrat Lord Douglas was not found among the other corpses

at the base of the Matterhorn, an expedition was organized to search for the remains and bring them to Zermatt for burial.[14] Thus, if the body must be present at the event of death to preserve the proper machinations of the experience of loss, the question of spectatorship, represented by the act of witnessing the body, becomes central to understanding both new and established theories of community.

Neal Beggs is aware of this connection and has been exploring the politics of the fall in his art since the late 1990s, partly as a result of his own extensive experience as a mountaineer. In his parody of Yves Klein's *Leap Into the Void* (1960), titled *Jump* (1999), the artist leaps from the top of a ladder onto a pile of mattresses. Beggs attaches metaphorical significance to the acts of climbing and falling as he comments on the risks inherent in artistic practice and the performative nature of the relationship between artist and public. A more sober commentary on the theme of the fall is expressed in a video collaboration with Belfast artist Dan Shipsides, titled *Alphabet Climb* (2004). Wandering the climbing town of Montserrat, Spain, artists encounter a man documenting the search for his missing brother who supposedly perished while climbing a nearby mountain [Fig. 3]. *Alphabet Climb* links the issue of spectatorship directly to the theme of community as we witness the man's capacity for dealing with the loss short-circuited by the absence of his brother's body. *Dear Prudence* extends the politics of the fall to a much wider audience by injecting these ideas into the public sphere through monumentality and narrative.

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Fig. 3. Neal Beggs and Dan Shipsides. *Alphabet Climb,* 2004. Video. Courtesy of the artists.

If understood as a technique of communication particular to institutions, monumentality promotes ideals of stability, permanence, transcendence, and power presented by a social elite for the "passive" contemplation of a dominated population.[15] Monumentality imposes order onto the populace by representing an entirely fictive model of social relations, and attempts to replicate those relations through the homogenization of public space. In the modern context, monumentality emerges from a distinctly humanist model of community, which, according to Jean Luc-Nancy, is epitomized by the myth of the supposedly lost Christian community.

Fig. 4. Neal Beggs. *Dear Prudence,* Brussels, 2007. Participants on the viewing platform. Courtesy of the artist.

Fig. 5. Neal Beggs. *Dear Prudence,* Brussels, 2007. Courtesy of Michel van Reysen.

> The modern conception of community centered on a notion of the community as a lost artifact, such as the natural family, the Athenian city, the Roman Republic, the first Christian community, corporations and brotherhoods, in which its members were bound by infrangible 'bonds,' the image of which was played back to the living through symbols, institutions, and rituals.[16]

Thus, monumentality may be read quite literally as a symbolic system of invisible "ropes" joining living members of the community to each other and their common ancestors objectified in stone and bronze.

In the Place Royale monumentality is communicated by an emphasis on verticality, expressed in the design of the space and in the classicizing architecture of the surrounding buildings. The façade of the church of St-Jacques-cur-Coudenberg, which serves to reinforce the sense of elevation provided by the topography of the Mont des Arts, deploys verticality in part to establish a hierarchy between the sacred/celestial on the one hand and the secular/worldly on the other. It also acts to remind the viewing subject that transcendence is the reward for a virtuous life, paid out to the elect upon death. Thus, the horizontal space of the plaza, which symbolizes the public life of the city, may also be seen to represent life more generally when considered as part of a symbolic opposition with verticality, which must be read as the space of death and transcendence. To secure this reading of the space further, one need only look to the monumental equestrian bronze of Godefroid de Bouillon placed in the center of the plaza in line with the central axis of the church. The modern fabrication of this statue, which commemorates a Christian crusader, speaks to the nostalgia in the modern period for the supposedly 'lost' Christian community mentioned by Nancy. The work posits as a common ancestor, a dead hero of the faith with no direct relevance to the modern inhabitants of Brussels, and does so by conforming to ancient tropes of violence and phallic power. Such monuments impose a single, monolithic reading not open to interpretation by the general public, for as Judith Baca notes, "from the triumphant bronze general on horseback—the public's view of which is the underside of galloping hooves—we find examples of public art in the service of dominance."[17] Community, in the humanist paradigm, therefore, takes place only through communion with a common ancestor and under the authoritative gaze of the monument.

The distinctive use of monumentality witnessed in *Dear Prudence*, however, works against the traditional monuments of the Place Royale by establishing an elaborate series of oppositions. In *Dear Prudence* themes of collectivity, vitality, discursivity, temporality, presence, ephemerality, democracy, the haptic, the metaphorical, and the nomadic are counterposed to those of traditional monumentality, represented by permanence, rootedness, elitism, the symbolic, timelessness, mortality, and transcendence. In the lived experience

of the project this dynamic is played out as participants gain the elevated perspective of the viewing platform, which is similar in height to the mounted figure of Bouillon only feet away [Fig. 4]. Participants assume the dominating gaze of Bouillon by ascending into the privileged realm of the vertical, thereby usurping the authority of the figurehead, and, by implication, the authority of the state and church. Moreover, *Dear Prudence*, is a temporary construction made of inexpensive materials capable of being disassembled and re-installed in a variety of contexts, whereas traditional monuments are composed of durable materials and draw their authority from their precise location in urban space. By performing an inversion of monumentality as it is traditionally experienced in Place Royale, *Dear Prudence* acquires status as an "anti-monument," a form of public sculpture that subverts the conventions of the monument by transferring agency to the powerless civilian.[18] Thus, the reference to the Matterhorn disaster, in which the broken rope plays such a central role, directs its assault on the traditional reading of the public monument as a symbol of unbreakable social bonds.

Despite the sculpture's ephemerality, the work survives in the form of documentary photographs taken by the artist and participants. These images provide key insights into the lived experience of the work and illustrate the project's critical engagement with the model of humanist community witnessed in the design of the Place Royale. An image of a fallen climber lying among the mattresses, for instance, details two distinct responses to the event of the fall, each suggesting the inoperative model of community [Fig. 5]. In the image, the spectators orient their bodies toward the body of the fallen climber; some contemplating the fall in silence, implied by the apparent motionlessness of certain figures, while others applaud by laughing and clapping. The silent witnessing of the lifeless body signifies the participants' inability to communicate with the 'deceased' climber, whose subjectivity, and therefore his human faculties of perception and communication, has been terminated. This response reveals that social bonds, if they exist at all, are terminated with the subjectivity of the 'deceased,' which is consistent with the inoperative form of community. In the inoperative model, community is experienced as a lived event or condition of "being-in-common," that only occurs upon witnessing the dead body of the other, and in turn may not be produced by rituals or institutions that would seek to preserve the deceased subject in the form of a transcendent being.[19] Thus, silence betrays the participant's inability to commune with the transcendent essence of the 'deceased' climber and reveals the significance of death as a destabilizing force.

On the other hand, if we interpret the event of the fall literally as the moment of death, applause celebrates the possibility of communication with the now 'deceased' subject who must therefore exist in some form other than a living body: a transcendent being still possessing faculties of communication. This

suggests a model of community particular to humanist tradition characterized by a transcendent and stable essence, or collective subjectivity, despite the fact that it is composed of supposedly autonomous individuals. In this model the dead are subsumed within the community, a process mediated by the symbols and rituals of institutions.[20]

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Fig. 6. Neal Beggs. *Dear Prudence*, Brussels, 2007. Tram passengers seen from the viewing platform. Courtesy of the artist.

Conversely, if *Dear Prudence* is understood as a form of repetitive play, the response to the fall identified as applause indicates the inoperative community, where applause is the celebration of the event of death as a revelation of the condition of being-in-common. The emphasis on the repetitive aspect of play in *Dear Prudence* actually works to address a primary shortcoming in the theory of the inoperative community, which over-rates the transformative power of death to affect changes in the survivor's subjectivity.[21] *Dear Prudence* compensates for this shortcoming by producing repetitive images of 'loss', intended to shock the 'survivor' from an atomized Cartesian model of subjectivity toward the relational or territorial model characteristic of the inoperative community.

Thus far, the documentary images of *Dear Prudence* illustrate the particular models of community at work in the project and underscore the significance of spectatorship in Nancy's theory of the inoperative community, specifically, the act of witnessing the dead body. Yet, the theme of spectatorship, which has a long history in modern art, centering mostly on the issue of participation, must be considered further in its relation to inherited assumptions

of avant-garde practice, namely, the identification of participants and spectators as 'active' and 'passive' respectively. Thinkers like Jacques Rancière, Michel de Certeau, and Roland Barthes have argued that spectatorship, the act of consuming texts and images, is a creative and even bodily practice of interpretation: by inserting his or her own fantasies and interpretations into the text, the spectator assumes authorship as a collaborator in the text's meaning.

In *Dear Prudence* the revision of the avant-garde paradigm is illustrated in two images: the first depicts a group of participants on the viewing platform, and the second captures passengers seated inside a yellow tram parked at the base of the sculpture from the elevated perspective of the viewing platform [Fig. 4 and 6]. The first image links the physical demands of ascent, associated with the qualities of "courage and strength," to the practice of observation and documentation. This is seen in the use of a camera by the participant on the left, by the young man in the center watching climbers below, and by the young woman engaging directly with the camera of the artist. In the second image, three tram passengers are engaged in a reciprocal act of observation with the artist's camera, suggesting that the enclosed space of the tram is still inscribed within the boundaries of the project. Whether or not these passengers become 'participants' depends on the degree to which they creatively interpret the project and what they say about the project after the fact. Thus, narrative, both in the form of written or spoken words and in the form of documentary photography, constitutes an act of participation through communication that Nancy would argue constitutes community itself—"community as communication."[22] Beggs applied this same logic to Edward Whymper's narrative of the Matterhorn disaster, by rephrasing the climber's text and offering the translation as an object of collective interpretation.

In conclusion, *Dear Prudence* reconstructs the politics of the fall in modern mountaineering narrative, which conveys social meanings about a perceived threat to community that death represents, to shift the contemporary discourse of spectatorship in the arts context toward a broader discussion of community. The historical reference to the Matterhorn disaster exposes the considerable valence in the wake of a great tragedy between humanist notions of the autonomous individual subject and the territorial model of subjectivity characteristic of the inoperative community. The politics of the fall is already etched in the collective memories of the inhabitants of Brussels as a result of the death of the popular leader, King Albert of Brussels, after his own fatal fall while climbing in 1936 (Neal Beggs, pers. comm.). Whatever effect Albert's death had on Brussels' sense of community is relived in the fall of each participant from the walls of *Dear Prudence*. By isolating the moment of the fall as a metaphorical representation of death, Beggs underscores the significance of spectatorship and the potential of the event to be translated into narrative, forging what Rancière terms a "community of storytellers and translators."[23]

1   See also C. Bishop, *Participation. Documents of Contemporary Art*, London 2006, 10-17.

2   For "play" see R. Vaneigem, *The Revolution of Everyday Life*, London 2006, 236. See also J. Rancière, 'The Emancipated Spectator', lecture, Frankfurt 2004.

3   M. De Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, Berkeley 1984, xxi, 175. For "*dérive*" see G. Debord and I. Chtcheglov, 'Theory of the Dérive', in K. Knabb, ed., *Situationist International Anthology*, Berkeley 1981, 50-54.

4   See also T. Andersen and A. E. Olesen, *Erindringer Om Asger Jorn*, Silkeborg 1982.

5   For "performative critique" see I. Borden, 'A Performative Critique of the City: The Urban Practice of Skateboarding, 1958-1998', *Everything*, Vol. 2, No. 4, 1999, 38-43. For "buildering" see A. Hartley, *LA Climbs: Alternative Uses For Architecture*, London 2003.

6   See J. Nancy, *Inoperative Community*, Minneapolis 1991; and 'Of Being in Common', in The Miami Theory Collective, ed., *Community at Loose Ends*, Minneapolis 1991.

7   F. Fleming, *Killing Dragons: The Conquest of the Alps*, New York 2000, 282.

8   Fleming, *Dragons,* 291. See also R. Macfarlane, *Mountains of the Mind: Adventures in Reaching the Summit*, New York 2003, 95-96.

9   E. Whymper, *Scrambles Amongst the Alps In the Years 1860 – 1869*, Washington, D.C. 2002, 380.

10 For a discussion of nineteenth-century attitudes to mountaineering see Macfarlane, *Mountains*, 66-102.

11 *The Times*, 27 July 1865, quoted in Fleming, *Dragons*, 291.

12 *London Illustrated News*, 29 July 1865, quoted in Fleming, *Dragons*, 291.

13 G. Rébuffat, *Men and the Matterhorn*, London 1965, 127.

14 Fleming, *Dragons*, 279-281.

15 For "passive" see H. Lefebvre, *Urban Revolution*, Minneapolis 2003, 21.

16 Nancy, *Inoperative*, 9.

17 J. Baca, 'Whose Monument Where?: Public Art in a Many-Cultured Society', in Suzanne Lacy, ed., *Mapping the Terrain: New Genre Public Art*, Seattle 2000, 132.

18 M. Miles, *Art, Space and the City: Public Art and Urban Futures*, London 1997, 58.

19 For "being-in-common" see Nancy, *Inoperative*, 27; for the theme of production, 31; and for witnessing death visually, 15.

20 Nancy, *Inoperative*, 9.

21 G. Kester, *Conversation Pieces*, Berkeley 2004, 154-163.

22 Nancy, *Inoperative*, 29.

23 Rancière, 'Emancipated'.