We are a lonely society. Most of the time we’re working or struggling to stay afloat and in between we comfort ourselves with haphazard friendships, professional networks, family and possibly marriage. We call these things “communities” even though they are all disconnected, fragmented, and don’t really support us. Your co-workers might like you a lot and meet you for a drink every now and then and they’d be sad if you get sick but you can’t expect them to pay your medical bills or bring you chicken soup or mop your brow when you have a fever. In our society we are forced to support ourselves.

The idea of a Skowhegan Burial Society emerged during a conversation between Sarah Workneh and a group of recent Skowhegan alumns following Hurricane Sandy. Sarah’s idea was to brainstorm ways in which Skowhegan could possibly provide material support for artists affected by natural disasters. I suggested (only partially jokingly) that we might consider setting up a burial society, for example) attempt to immediately realize their idealisms practice) or Skowhegan (if it ever did attempt to become a burial society, for example) attempt to immediately realize their idealisms practice)

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My idea was that the central function of art and the function of the artist’s role in society, questions of the possibility of community, organization of the individual arts, questions of the possibility of community, organization of the individual arts, of the new trend of “social practice” in art, and of the very real social antagonisms that institutions like Skowhegan must work over paper over I proposed an idea about which I am still uncertain. My idea was that the central function of art and the function of Skowhegan are similar. Both can ask questions about what is possible in society. At best they can help us to imagine possibilities that we had not previously seen. But when art, (in the form of social practice) or Skowhegan (if it ever did attempt to become a burial society, for example) attempt to immediately realize their idealisms beyond what our essentially non-cooperative society can support, art can intend to lead to bad results. This is not to say that nothing real should be attempted, that we should satisfy ourselves with image-making and not attempt real social change, just that we should be aware of the enormity of the task. In creating a community, in creating a space of possible community, we should be aware of the context in which we are operating. We should remember that the real supportive lifelong community we should be aware of the context in which we are operating.

The possibility of community is not carefree. Kallie Jones, Martha Rosler, Dave Beech, Mike Davis, and Claire Bishop have all, using their own terms, thought long and hard about visual art’s redefined interest in community. The phenomenon that these writers, artists, and historians track mandates that we think about the idea of community in relation to the closing of community hospitals, the privatization of community services, and the yet-unknown and myriad effects of community development corporations. Community, as a discursively linked as an idea, functions to take up the hopeful remains of the public and publicness. It, at the same time, oversimplifies the causes and effects of the lack of public services, and, most offensively, the historical and economic events that first brought these services into being. Community, as a series of relations born out of group-organization, group-struggle, group-identity, and group-pleasure, has become something to preserve, to create, and to fight on behalf of. These fights are both intramural, and extra-communal. Today, these fights come often under the purview of a professionalized entity such as a nonprofit. Nonprofits and hybrid government bodies with diverse and often antithetical goals all use community as a term to rally around. Similarly, museums and the artist-run spaces have taken up the concept of community as a space to exercise the mandate of engaging audiences, providing knowledge, and manifesting cultural credibility. Following the lead of progressive nonprofits, art institutions of all sizes have designated community as the place for imagining what it is to be done. From community, to community involvement, to an “art world” that insists on the presence of “art communities,” we experience ourselves in relation to the idea of community, virtual and otherwise: as part of, as partial to, or, simply as apart. Community, has, as such, become the only viable reason to do anything socially, economically, and increasingly, artistically.

Why, then, discuss community in relation to the opening of Skowhegan’s new space on 22nd street between 6th and 7th Avenues in Manhattan? Partly, because the question of how community might manifest in our day-to-day lives today and tomorrow, rather than as a summer memory, is of great importance. Partly, in order to recognize that we need the idea of community much more than it needs us. Partly, to emphasize that the aspirations and needs that constitute Skowhegan form its possibilities, and that these possibilities, prefigured and executed by the ninth weeks (or more) of actual Main time, make Skowhegan what it is and, perhaps more importantly, what it can be. And, partly to propose that, if we choose to depend on such a term to describe the relations we seek, then we do so with a great humility, and not at all with the confidence it is employed. If we are to propose an expansive horizon of action and possibility—as a place to find the alternatives we seek within a world of increasingly few—then we need to proceed with a real belief in something else, even if that something demands a name other than what we first imagined.