

About *Communal Parts*

By Philippe Hameau
Anthropologist

(Translated by Maureen Gorman)

The same question is posed to the forty-two habitants of a residence in Vincennes: "In honor of the retirement of your caretakers, please leave them a message of your choice." A succession of portraits taken in fixed shots follows in no particular order and the comments, wishes, and thanks are often in a standard style. The residents are filmed in their everyday environments (apartment, stairwell, office, grocery store) with the shot framed in a way that only a few details are shown (a painting, an aquarium, flowers, a series of pots, a stuffed panda bear, mailboxes, etc.). "*Communal Parts* does not have the pretension to formulate any message. It is not about demonstrative process," writes the author in the booklet that accompanies the DVD. This 26 year-old filmmaker explores questions about reality: perceived, represented, and enhanced reality. And yet, no voice over introduces or explains the scenes to us, but the commentary in the booklet and the shape of the film are sensitive in giving more than a long summary and in orienting the viewer's perception.

The length and the static style of the shots allow the viewer to take possession of the images and of the life that is expressed by the body and by the words. However, very quickly the viewer feels a certain sort of discomfort, the discomfort of having to share that of the interviewees who are placed in an unusual situation and are subjected to the camera's gaze that continues until the end of the sequence. Many of them stumble over their words, look elsewhere, use a third party (dog, child, spouse) to compensate for their embarrassment, or had taken the time to write out their message or to prepare a song. Many hesitate about the end of the shot: should they address the caretaker directly or instead the filmmaker who will transmit their messages? Does this discomfort permit another way to see people? Does it create empathy? Nothing is less certain, but this voyeurism is not unhealthy either. At first glance, it's nice to learn that these residents had interacted with serious, likeable, and helpful caretakers and that a collective meal will soon be organized where they will talk about the caretakers, who will not be present.

In fact, apart from their residence, what do these individuals of different ages, genders, origins, family and economic situations have in common? What are the similarities between their attitudes and their discourses? Behind the conformity of the messages (the caretaker's tidiness, the well-kept buildings, a well-deserved retirement, and the idea of spending time with children and grandchildren are leitmotifs), the residents really only talk about themselves and their expectations.

We come to understand that the work of the caretakers was only recognized as such because it conformed to the idea that the residents had about it. Maintenance, surveillance, repairs, and listening are often referenced, although some phrases also suggest that there were passing misunderstandings. The caretakers, considered together or separately, were there for seventeen years and had most importantly represented a psychological support for the residents (a little hello in the morning, brief exchanges), a model for the others (immediate service if keys were lost or if there were a plumbing problem), and other underlying moral reassurances. However, human relationships are often restricted to these perfunctory exchanges, as if the caretakers assure a presence despite constituting an entity outside of the group of residents: these individuals whose function is primordial and expected and whose role is to serve and to assure the cohesion of the residents who do not necessarily communicate. The occasion of the film thus leads the residents to evoke the caretakers who preceded the couple that is now about to leave them (even if the departure is socially acceptable), and to envisage who will be the next caretakers in the sense of continuity as well as a comparison. The film plays upon the vision of self and of the community of residents who voluntarily place themselves under the protection of caretakers.



Communal parts (video still)