EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION

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DECONSTRUCTING THE MASTER SIGNIFIER OF COMMUNITY: BETWEEN THE PRE-MODERN AND MODERN COMMUNITY OF ORGANIC SOLIDARITY AND THE POSTMODERN COMMUNITY OF TECHNOLOGICAL DISSEMINATION IN CYBERSPACE

These pure singularities communicate only in the empty space of the example, without being tied by any common property, by any identity. They are expropriated of all identity, so as to appropriate belonging itself, the sign &. Tricksters or fakes, assistants or 'toons, they are the exemplars of the coming community.

The Coming Community, Giorgio Agamben, 10.1

WESTERN INDIVIDUALISM

At first glance, it seems almost paradoxical to raise the question of community within the context of art and art education; after all doesn't the 500 year legacy of 'master' and 'masterpiece' imply singularity, uniqueness, and individualism? doesn't art education promote self-expression as one of its founding tenets? and, hasn't the romantic myth, characterized the Western artist, always male, a loner and a genius, an adventurer out on his quest to capture the 'truths' of Nature, found, to be sure in that unfathomable and unrepresentable sublime? (Battersby, 1989) And didn't modernism eventually ensure that a 'rugged' obstinate individualism associated with a particular recognizable artistic style was the master signifier around which all others revolved? A recent film like Jacques Rivette's La Belle Noiseuse (1991) which lovingly explores the painter's creative process, merely confirms, yet again, that artistic identity itself is etched in that very process of uniqueness.

The Batignolles Group, the creators of Impressionism (Claude Monet, Auguste Renoir, Alfred Sisley, Frederic Bazille, Camille Pissaro, Paul Cézanne, Berthe Morisot, Edgar Degas and Edouard Manet),

might at first glance be seen as an exception, as would any artistic 'movement' which bans a number of individuals together in solidarity around a central problematic. Yet, there is enough documentary evidence to suggest that their highly important innovations and achievements were the result of a fortunate conjunction of a congenial group of friends. The 'problem' which spurred them to the joint exploration of contemporary 'scientific' color theory established an aesthetic ideology which pitted itself against The Academy of Fine Arts, providing an antithetical bureaucracy necessary to tighten the group's stance toward a common enemy or Other. Think of Die Brücke, Blaue Ritter and the Surrealists and a counter argument at first appears plausible. But, as Maria Rogers (1976) now some twenty years ago argued, there was always fierce competition and rivalry amongst 'members' as to who was to be the intellectual leader. Having a common enemy may well be all that held these 'movements' together. With the Batignolles Group, each of the painters was experimenting in a different direction; hence, they could not be properly called a 'school.' And because this was the very time that canvas and careers could be manufactured by the small-gallery systems, the group members could not agree as to how their work should be presented: individually, as a group show, in established Salons, or in alternative ones (White & White, 1965).

As is well-known, the artist as 'blue chip' stock in post-war America eventually become an established theme in the sociology of art (Guilbaut, 1983). The master signifier that names a movement or a group is simply the assurance that differences are glossed over to ensure that some sense of a rational order of development and identification is possible to write a structural view of art history. Liberalism and its articulation in the form of a self-referential Abstract Expressionism championed by Clement Greenberg in the '60s presented the heroic artist as the bearer of his/her discipline. If we now add to this generalized account that the artist is often deemed as 'mad,' or at other times a 'dandy,' it seems that the rhetoric for this fundamental discourse of individualism has held the field of art and art education for some time, and continues to do so today through the auspices of DBAE. Self-expression and uniqueness sanctify the signifier /creative/ giving justice to what form of art should be taught in public schools. So why has 'community' now emerged on the horizon of urgency in this postmodern period to act as a foil to this long standing development? The binary of the heroic artist (as represented by such critics as Hilton Kramer of the New Criterion) against the social collective
where art is very much integrated in public spaces (as represented by someone such critics as Suzi Gabik or Suzanne Lacy, 1995) presents a microcosm of this issue.

Undoubtedly part of that answer as to why the master signifier /community/emerges to ‘button down’ the debate is because of the historical failure of an ‘avant-garde’ which was to have provided a vanguard function; namely, to be the preservers of elite high culture, maintaining standards, abhorring kitsch, and showing ethical and moral leadership. However, this ruse resulted in the isolation of the artist from the rest of society, and the stress on artistic autonomy merely condemned art to social impotence. Distinct cultures of taste, as Bourdieu (1984) would have it, emerged in the ‘70s where the dominant modes of neo-liberalist capitalism continued to characterize art primarily as specialized objects to be contemplated and enjoyed rather than created for moral, practical or social reasons. Marketing and consumption continue to be the superseding values which are with us today in their hyped-up forms (Wernick, 1991). The implosion of elite art and popular culture into one another has erased any clear defining line as to the difference between them making it more and more difficult to sort out art’s social function. On the one hand there is a continual re-cycling of ‘high’ art through the ‘quote’ in an attempt to recoup its practice as a discipline; on the other hand there is a continual dispersion of its definition as it begins to infiltrate everyday life (‘culture’). We have arrived at a point where ‘almost’ anything goes: from shitting on an art gallery floor to an artist nailing his penis to a board; from high performance piercing to gallery pornography, the spaces between such ‘outrageous’ acts is too narrow to differentiate. As Wendy Steiner (1995) calls it, this is “the scandal of pleasure” (and I would add, pain).

“Reproduce your name, spectacularize yourself, or perish seems to be the market standard.” It seems the more often an artist’s name can change its appearance, the more likely the market consumption of it will be. Whereas modernism gave us distinct artistic styles—with Picasso perhaps being the exemplary here: changing himself only now-and-again (e.g., ‘blue period,’ ‘pink period,’ ‘analytic cubism,’ ‘surrealist period,’ etc.) as the recent retrospective of his work confirms —postmodernism gives us the Madonna phenomenon where ‘style as name’ has become a costume change from one performance to the next; or the name has disappeared, merely to reappear in the form of a masquerade or a disguise that adapts to a particular discursive do-

main, or attaches body parts to itself to mix-n-match genders. Here I am paradigmatically referring to the change in Cindy Sherman’s oeuvre. If the viewer were to ask: “Will the ‘real’ Cindy Sherman please stand up?” there is no ‘one’ Sherman who will stand and be counted. So, say ‘good-bye’ to depth hermeneutics — the struggles to read what is ‘behind’ or ‘below’ the ‘text,’ and say ‘hello’ to the new surface hermeneutics: what you see is what you get at the ‘moment,’ i.e., interaction art, installation art, performance art, ephemeralism; in brief, the consumption of an artistic niche that has been prepared for the audience by a well-defined structured language-game (cf. Wittgenstein). The signifier marks the realm of discourse. In Sherry Turkle’s (1995) pun, the postmodernist attitude requires that we “take things at their interface value.” It’s all in the ‘look’ or the “glance” to use Bryson’s (1981) earlier formulation of it.

DISPERSED CYBER COMMUNITIES

Obviously for some this hyper-narcissistic process has gone too far. The call for more traditional forms of ‘community’ is on lips everywhere—in national politics, in the academic disciplines, in education, and even in business (see Noddings, 1996). However, for others, this is merely the beginning of a fantasy for a re-newed individuality; the taste of a more exciting future to come where the proper name will dissolve itself into the splendor of cyberspace and exist virtually in what ever form suits it at the time; the interactor will gender b(1)end at will as she occupies the site/sight/cite of the ‘interface’ which now clumsily still exists as a lettered keyboard. Moreover, such hyper-individuality will metamorphose into its very opposite; namely, a cyber-community of like-minded individuals who meet together in the abstractions of space to discuss art and technology (one such site/sight/cite which is currently ‘happening’ in this direction is the Eyebeam atelier). So, why physically go to a gallery, museum, or theme-park when the art can come to you, the spectator? Why not let the electronic on-line gallery come to you through the fantastic screen of the internet? Why not hold court in the telematic cyber-classroom where art can be discussed and experienced in different ways; where the vast possibilities and resources of the global internet become available? Art can now ‘flood’ in from every conceivable site/sight/cite. Here, the benefits of a cyberspace ‘community’ can be experienced as well, through chat lines and MUDs (Multiple User Domains).
This question of a cyber-community which extends the legacy of Western heroic art raises a challenge to those art educators who shun such a dis-embodied dystopian world-view; those who—nostalgically perhaps—recall an anarchism where art was socially integrated into an embodied community; where the local issues of the public sphere become acted out through drama plays, musical performances and artistic rituals (cf. Augustus Boals). Any 'natural' human disaster seems brings out the co-operative and supportive side of humanness, and the arts have always played a large role in both healing and celebration during stressful times. Such views of community reveal back to pre-modernist indigenous societies, and to modernist nation building where a common purpose held the imaginary community together (Anderson, 1995).

It is important, therefore, to explore more fully this question of a cyber-community. Is there anything that should be of concern for art educators who wish to embrace this virtual space and the promotion of cyber-art that goes along with it? We can begin this query by noting that long before the fashion of VR (virtual reality) came onto the scene/seen, Gilles Deleuze (1990) elaborated the status of virtuality apropos to the mystery of a “sense-event.” From the pre-historic paintings on the walls of the Lascaux caves, he argued, to VR, it seems human beings confront the same enigma: how is it possible for us to suspend reality and become engrossed in the virtual space of the fantastic screen? How can the ‘incorporeal’ event emerge out of the mixture of bodies, or bodily causes? For Deleuze (like Jacques Lacan) such a “sense-event” could not be reduced to a network of material (bodily) causes. Indeed, this fantastic dimension—or specter—was part of our everyday experience. In cyberspace the viewer is confronted with the possibility of a ‘concrete,’ and ‘sensual’ work of art, a text, image, video clip, with fragments of music and other sounds, which together produce an ‘abstract’ meaning. (This is not unlike Eisenstein’s dream of producing an “intellectual montage” of Das Kapital, i.e., concretizing Marxist theory by presenting it as a clash of concrete images.) With hypertext the possibility emerges of a new form of montage. As Douglas Rushkoff (1996) notes, the most advanced video games are very ‘visceral’ experiences, images and sounds penetrate the body. Like the paradigmatic film Tron, the mind is drawn into the machine’s game without the attendant visor and data glove. Such a hypertext collage changes the meaning of what a work of art is: for now the interface user confronts a hybrid of written texts/images/sound bytes/and movements. The projected fantasy is that this same possibility could eventually be extended to a cyberspace community of individuals.

The status of VR is provided by the differentiation that must be made between imitation and simulation. VR doesn’t imitate reality, it simulates it by way of generating its semblance, a concept made famous by Baudrillard’s notion of the simulacrum (or copy of a copy) over thirty years ago (1968)! In other words, imitation imitates a pre-existing real-life model, whereas simulation generates the semblance of a non-existing reality—it simulates something that doesn’t exist. As such, the supplement of ‘computer art’ has blurred the original/copy distinction reducing all ‘art’ that ends up floating in cyberspace into information of sorts, another significant point made long ago by John Berger (1972). In contrast to imitation, which sustains belief in pre-existing ‘organic’ reality, simulation retroactively ‘denaturalizes’ reality itself by way of disclosing the mechanism responsible for its generation. In other words, the ‘ontological wager’ of simulation is that there is no ultimate difference between nature and its artificial reproduction. (Like the Blade Runner world, the dividing line between artificial and natural life has been erased. At least on the ‘surface’ of things you can’t tell the difference whether the cyborg is human, or the human is a cyborg.) Consequently, there is no need to ‘travel’ to the art gallery to view the ‘genuine’ articles. The experience ultimately need not be so impoverished once the hyper-collage of the artistic hypertext is established, involving perhaps holography. The digitalized ‘real’ has reproduced a simulation of the pre-modern ‘concrete thought’ of a non-transparent world, what has been referred to as a neo-Medievalist literalization (cf. Umberto Eco), the only difference being that the sign systems circulate and continuously morph (or ‘slide’—like the defunct television series, Sliders) into something else without a transcendental signified (e.g., God, or ‘truth’) to hold them accountable. Community exists here as well: disembodied, on chat lines, in interest groups, in MUDs. This disseminated community is then abstractly ‘re-embodied’ in cyberspace as a meeting of disguised minds.

The question to ask now is: “Just what is this ‘digitalized real’?” Is it ‘really real’ or it rather a produced or constructed real which covers over the mystery that lies beyond language, namely in what Lacan called the psychic register of the Real. To answer this I offer a recent screen image: For those who have seen/scene the recent sci-fi film Dark City (1998), the cyberspace ‘community’ and the hypertext art forms that float in cyberspace looking for an image-screen
at the sight/site/cite of some interface form such a concretized ‘city.’ For this city is simply a binary ‘reality’ which consists of a hyper-complex digitalized combination of pluses (+++) and minuses (---), or zeros (0000) and ones (1111) which establish the appearance of a structure that covers over the abyss of what is unknown and unfathomable, i.e., Lacan’s Real. Beyond the Dark City’s shores there is ‘nothing,’ simply black empty unknowable space. This fictitious city (or cyberspace community) is maintained by the very minds (aliens in this case) who think and dream it. Buildings continuously morphs and twist into new configurations as ‘real mechanical time’ stops and the ‘real’ inhabitants (earthling in this case) become comatose while cybertime begins and the new city continues to be erected. At the end of the film, the hero simply wills this ‘other’ dark fiction to go away so that he may live in bright sunlight. But this ‘darkness’ will not go away so easily from VR, and here is why.

REPRESSIONS OF THE DARK

If Dark City embodies an in-sight into the VR experience, it is that virtualization becomes the perfect materialization of the social order. In this sense the virtual gallery systems try to redeem ‘real life’ (RL) by trying to re-locate it in VR to achieve perfect symbolic accountability. What counts as ‘real’ art finds itself ‘on line.’ (This is a bit like the phenomenon of a student submitting a handwritten essay for grading. It’s unpolished look when compared to word-processed writing immediately devalues its grade. The surface look (form) becomes more important than substance (content). The same principle repeats itself when administrators post school grades on their web sites/sites/sights to legitimate the school’s excellence, even though few parents will visit its web page.)

The consequences of this are far reaching. The notion of a ‘vanishing’ interface where communication with cyberspace becomes transparent, as if one were directly looking and sensually experiencing a work of art, raises the issue: what if ‘consciousness’ itself were a frame through which we perceive the universe, simply as just another ‘interface’ — one of difference but not of kind? As soon as one does this the Lacanian Real is foreclosed, and all of ‘reality’ is reduced to the interplay of discourse, i.e., constructed realities. As Zizek (1997) queries, when a user playing with the multiplicity of Internet Relay Chat (IRC) channels says to himself “What if real life (RL) itself is just one more IRC channel?” or, with respect to multiple windows in a hypertext, “What if RL is just one more window?” the illusion to which s/he succumbs is strictly correlative to the opposite one, i.e., to the commonsense attitude of maintaining our belief in the full reality outside the virtual universe where the fantasy dimension is simply repressed. Which is to say, one should avoid both traps, the simple direct reference to external reality outside cyberspace, as well as the opposite attitude of “there is no external reality, RL is just another window.” Derrida’s often quoted statement: “There is nothing outside the text” takes on a new understanding here. He does not mean that everything should be reduced to textual discourses, but that there is no ‘THING’ outside the text — no m-signifier that makes sense, but only non-sense. This ‘no-thing’ is precisely Lacan’s Real, that which is beyond language.

VR becoming the realization of the perfect Symbolic Order is perhaps the greatest danger as to what is to become of a ‘humane’ being but this is only part of the danger. What the virtualization of art and the call to cyber-community summon is a fundamental change of our hermeneutic experience of everyday reality. This happens through a process on at least three levels: first, it annihilates the distinction between the original work of art and its copy; this move repeats the general shift of techno-biology which posits living nature as being something technically manipulable, i.e., the only ‘real’ is the structure of underlying DNA. Second, given that VR generates ‘true’ reality undermines the difference between ‘true’ reality and semblance, i.e., the art educator is being offered the ‘hyperreal’ image of the designer’s surface of colour and outline which supplant both depth and volume. The ‘surface’ then takes precedence over substance. Another way of saying this is that a ‘glance’ aesthetic (or ‘look’) is supplanting the gaze. Desire which is defined by a structural lack is supplanted by the scopic drive which is marked by jouissance (orgasmic pleasure). We are back to Wendy Steiner’s complaint. And thirdly, when it comes to the cyberspace community of MUD (Multiple User Domains) the notion of Self is radically undermined (and not strengthened) by decentering it. The idea being here that such a ‘dissemination’ of a unique Self should be endorsed for the future holds the possibility of a ‘collective mind’ composed of a plurality of self-images swarming about together without a global coordinating center so as to produce a Self disconnected from all the pathologies of the body’s trauma. The collective mind is touted for its sanitary and therapeutic possibilities.
The global cyberspace community enables the participant to discover new aspects of the Self, a proliferation of shifting, often masked identities without a “real” person behind them. So what’s wrong with this utopian vision? of the arbitrariness of a produced and constructed Self as exemplified by the morphing bodies of a Madonna, or a Grace Jones? What’s wrong with the virtual museum and its community of cyberspace visitors? How shall we answer?

What this means is that such a conception of community is slowly eroding the phenomenological perception of our bodies. As the difference between ‘objective’ or ‘living’ (original/organic) and ‘artificial’ is undermined, then the distinction between what is ‘living’ and its ‘appearance’ becomes blurred. The metaphysical kernel of what we mysteriously call ‘life’ becomes concretized rather than remaining empty and void and existing in the Real. This leads to the dispersal of the Self where there is a profound loss of the surface which separates inside from outside. What is inside the body is being replaced by what is outside it; namely technology through artificial implants making us become like the dreaded Borgs of Star Trek: The New Generation (see Bukatman, 1993); and what is outside the body is always inside as we become immersed in VR we lose contact with RL. The image here is that each human being is being stretched and mapped out on a long flat strip of data that codes every emotion, every movement, every body part. With VR and technobiology this loss of boundary damages and cripples not only our attitude to our own bodies but also to the bodies of other persons. We suspend our knowledge of the flesh and what exists beneath the skin’s surface of the Other. It becomes easier and easier to walk by homeless beggars as our empathic bodies becomes distantiated more and more from RL. RL becomes more and more like a screen-image in VR—the very interplay of these two psychic registers of ‘reality’ can be found in the film Last Action Hero (see also Murray, 1993). The scopic drive of the ‘look’ produces an Anästhetisierung (emotional numbness) (Welsh, 1990) rather than the aestheticization art educators sought for. The person becomes all sur’face’ as if it were only the ‘face’ which expressed the ‘soul,’ and the disembodied grain of the voice carried only the person’s character. There is then, a progressive loss of contact with RL as our senses become ‘plugged into’ the incoming electro-waves. The ‘eye’ and the ‘ear’ have metaphorically become grotesque protruding organs of our bodies.

Equally disturbing has been the way the disseminated Self at play in the cyber-community brings out what is usually repressed in RL. At the interface it is possible to play a game of false images by putting on a satisfying mask, to become someone other than who you are. So the game is to be seductive and flirt when in RL you are drab and dull; or to act out as if you are heroic and brave when in RL you anything but that. All this can be done in the face of the screen-image without taking responsibility for such projected egos. It is possible, as well, to create a screen persona where you can project imaged aspects of yourself that you wouldn’t ‘normally’ dare to admit in RL. So in the anonymity of a MUD community you can become a promiscuous woman and engage in activities which you would never permit yourself in RL. To do so would disintegrate your sense of personal identity.

Hence, the cyber-space community is composed of RL people acting out what they take to be their ‘normal’ selves, and people who are acting out ‘more than themselves.’ The dialectics between RL self and a VR self present many ethical dilemmas. By suspending the usual hindrances in RL which prevent oneself from realizing his/her ‘dark side’ in VR, enables all of one’s libidinal potential to be poured out onto the image-screen. (The increasing number of hate groups, pornographic web sites, para-military anarchist groups, etc. in cyberspace are well-known dangers.) All that is repressed finds its way as a virtual electronic ego. E-mail contacts have resulted in sexual encounters—sometimes successful but more often failed meetings once couples meet in RL; incidences of on-line sexual harassment, betrayal, and on-line ‘rape’ in MUD communities have become standard occurrences. In many ways these screen-image encounters are more ‘real’ than RL because cyberspace exists in what Lacan termed the Imaginary—the level of fantasy but without the checks of everyday reality, i.e., of what Lacan called the Symbolic Order. The Law can’t quite colonize all of the cyberspace. There is no complete control and regulation here, and hence it offers the interface user a post-Oedipal playground of “Cyberspace Delights.” Presenting oneself as handsome and smart in VR may well be repressing and not confronting what may be the opposite the case in RL. Inhibition and shame is suspended in the fantasy scene/seen of VR for anxiety can be avoided. The pure flux of the drive is what is encountered which means that the universe which has been freed of everyday inhibitions turns out to be a universe of unbridled sadomasochistic violence and will to domination. So, for instance, a married man can maintain his marriage as just another social role and engage in extra-marital sex as ‘true love.’ However, the
moment he is confronted with the choice of leaving his family and moving in with his ‘true love’ he often finds that the social mask of marriage means more to him than his personal intense passion. His guilty feelings and hesitation indicate that some semblance of the Law is still at work on his psyche. On the image-screen, however, the fantasy can be played out...until of course the couple meets and “reality bites/bytes,” to quote a recent film.

We come to the conclusion that on the one hand cyberspace communities present the dream of a new populism in which the decentralized networks will allow citizens to come together in a new public cyberspace and build a participatory grass-roots political system, a transparent world in which the mystery of the impenetrable bureaucratic state agencies are dispelled. However, the use of computers and VR as a tool to rebuild community results in the building of a community inside the machine, reducing individuals to isolated monads, each of them alone, facing a computer, ultimately unsure if the person s/he communicates with on the screen is a ‘real’ person, a false persona, an agent which combines a number of ‘real’ persons, or simply a computerized program...The ambiguity of this antinomy remains irreducible and undecidable, like Lyotard’s differend.

NOSTALGIC COMMUNITIES

I have spent an extraordinary amount of space discussing the virtual community because it is the absent Other of the essays on community that appears in this journal. While there is an ever increasing layer of art educators who advocate the technological advances of being ‘on-line’, by and large, there has been by far a stronger refusal to abandon the materiality of the body in the artistic process. Hysterizing the body in reaction to its ‘disappearance’ can also be seen in the increase of the fitness craze, tattooing, body piercing, hair coloring, s/m ritualization, high performance art, and gender b(l)ending. These are symptomatic of why the body wants to be marked to ‘feel’ itself alive again even if it means pain. The jitters of the technological fin de millénaire with its call to ‘community’ has perhaps become a nostalgic yearning promoted mostly by moral baby-boomers who fantasize an imaginary community of yesteryear. The American Right has laid claim to the magical romanticized decade of the ’50s when ‘everything was all Right’: no gangs, no killings, no moral decay. The suburbs had the ‘industrial man’ working while mom stayed home with the kids. (The rampant juvenile delinquency of the decade is simply repressed.) This patriarchal re-instatement of the family is but the tip of the iceberg which presents the turmoil of a re-defined masculinity, as illustrated by the ‘Million Man March’ and the ‘Promise Keepers,’ two significant symptomatic manifestations of a nostalgic ‘return’ to ‘family values.’

In opposition, the Left has claimed an identity politics where community now becomes a trope for issues of ethnicity, race, class, folk, etc., where issues of representation continue to rage. Who represents whom? Who amongst the member of the community is allowed to do the representing? Who defines ‘them?’ Here, it is the community of memory which is often at issue. Native-Americans and Aboriginal peoples (First Nations) have taken on an almost mystical status by art educators who believe that the authenticity of art lies in its ritualization. There is a danger here, of course, in resurrecting forms of postmodern neo-primitivism where the ‘noble savage’ comes back yet again to play its role of relieving white guilt. In these developments the question of the dark side of organic community is rarely raised, for the dark side harbors the difficult issues of difference, i.e., the abjected Other is needed in order for such a community to define and maintain itself (Kristeva, 1991).

As Frederic Jameson (1991) points out, the antinomy of postmodernism is marked by construction and essentialism. On the one hand, the ideal being that VR makes possible the notion that everything—socially, symbolically, technologically—is constructed, and contingent, i.e., there is no pre-existing ground—only an abyss upon which our species builds its structures. On the other hand essentialism presents a desperate search for grounded fundamentals—the return to Nature in search for a Limit—an ecological transcendental signifier. Hence, New Age anti-Cartesianism advocates a spontaneous spiritualism by breaking away from technological domination. In contrast advocates of “Deep Ecology” search for the very opposite—the complete technological reproduction of reality, the full fantasy of which means that future. VR will allow subjects to abandon their bodies and become ‘ghosts in the machine.’

For art educators who react to this proliferation of post-modern hypernarcissism, the monadism of VR, and the endless, often boring, surfing of the Net to find a MUD to join, or a chat group to converse
with, there has been a turn to the nostalgia of community of yester-
year (cf. Ferdinand Tönnies, a *gemeinschaft* as opposed to a *gesellschaft*) which somehow remains ‘grounded’ in our species being of co-operation. There is a longing to bring art back into its ritualistic functions where it is embodied in community. It is no surprise, therefore, why a fair proportion of art educators and artists have taken up the chant of indigenous peoples, believing that such artistic expression—by not being delegated to a separate social sphere—is not only more ‘authentic’ and beneficial but has retained its ‘aura’ (cf. Walter Benjamin)—its spiritualism and healing effects— which art lost due to capitalist technological reproduction. It is this ‘New Age spiritualism’ which concerns many of them.

The four essays presented here offer different responses to the master signifier of *community* which tries so hard to stop the unbridled consumerism of neoliberalist capitalism with its need for a decentered and global subject who enjoys. By and large, all four essays tend to favour an identity politics of one form or another. In this sense they might be identified as Left leaning in their value system. The first essay, Deborah Smith-Shank’s “Sugar and Spice and Everything: Reflections on a Feminist Aesthetic,” presents the reader with a narrative of her transformations towards becoming embodied as a feminist artist, arriving at what she confirms to be a ‘crone stage’ for her. The feminist community she calls upon is an “imagined one.” Not explicitly mentioned her loyalties might be gleaned between the lines as perhaps identifying with eco-feminists like Lucy Lippard whose earlier book *Overlay* (1983) presents the metaphorical links between art, the body of woman, and Nature. As Sherry Ortner (1974) once argued—within the beliefs of many indigenous peoples woman was to Nature as man was to Culture: she lactates, bleeds, gives birth, socializes children, and cares for the nourishment of the body. Smith-Shank raises how the patriarchal community, what might be identified as the patriarchal Big Other in Lacanian terms, structures as to what counts as art. Through her identification with the imagined community of feminism, Smith-Shank is able to cathet her ego Ideal as a feminist artist and teacher who makes a difference.

Next, Rita Irwin is ‘drawn’ by serendipitous circumstances to the aboriginal Paiwan people of southern Taiwan; drawn to a traditional society where art as a separate ‘word’ and a ‘discipline’ does not yet exist. She presents her experiential encounter with the Paiwan as yet another example of anthropological ‘translation’ which has received so much attention amongst anthropological circles (Niranjana, 1992). What should be the approach to the Other? How is exoticization to be avoided? How are art educators to avoid updating the ideology of the noble savage? Who benefits for the ‘translation’ that goes on between cultures? Irwin identifies her encounter as providing an instance for the practice of a democratic form of social reconstructionism for art education where the art teacher and students “speak up” for disenfranchised socio-cultural groups. This is best done, she argues, by recognizing one’s own roots/routes and the arterial connections that can be made with the Other.

This essay is followed by Christine Ballengee Morris’s essay on Paulo Freire, the well-known Brazilian critical educator who spent his life as an advocate of the oppressed, attempting to give them a voice of literacy so that they could found their own democratic futures. Upon his recent death, in May of 1997, there have been a number of both critical and supportive views of his work as a community activist (see overview by Weiler, 1996). He has been taken to task for the way his literacy programs already pre-determine the kind of reader he wanted (Bowers, 1983), while feminists have strongly objected to his inability to incorporate a feminist stance above class analysis and his unacknowledged contribution of his first wife to his further education. However, no one can deny Freire’s impact on North American critical education. In her essay, “Paulo Freire: Community Based Arts Education,” Morris provides a useful focus on the 1996 presentation Freire made at Diadema’s Congress of Cultural Education and Leisure Sports; she then presents how art education based on community activism might incorporate Freirean tenets.

The next essay, “Creating Community Through Art: Two Research Project Reviews” by Seymour Simmons III, might be considered as an example of at least some of Freire’s ideas at work across the United States throughout various community based arts programs which try to resolve contemporary social problems. Seymour Simmons explicates two recent research projects done by Harvard Project Zero and its affiliates which provide a broad picture as to what is currently going on. He provides an exposé of the Lincoln Center Institute Arts-in-Education Survey Study and the Project Co-Arts survey, providing portraits of community art centers whose focus is on education in economically disadvantaged communities.
In the last essay, "Public Genre Art Education," Gaye Leigh Green presents her readers with a ten-fold list of art forms, or strategies to initiate what she identifies as a "social reconstructivist" art education that is needed today. Green provides concrete examples by art students at Western Washington University for each of these strategies. Through such efforts, argues Green, art moves into the community and becomes more socially as well as morally relevant, making a difference not only to the lives of the artists who undertake these projects, but also to their communities by enhancing the sociopolitical awareness of American culture, and to their neighborhoods in which they reside.

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Sugar and Spice and Everything: Reflections on a Feminist Aesthetic

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Over the past 25 years, feminist art, art criticism, and action have allowed insights into the work of women artists. Because culture imposes an assumed unity on a diversity of codes and has a naturalizing function, it makes the status quo appear as given and enduring. Feminist artwork disrupts common cultural assumptions by purposefully calling into question the arbitrariness of cultural sign systems. It brings into the conversation those cultural signs which are routinely unexamined and forces a look. This article is about feminist artwork, feminist context(s), and my own development as a woman, artist, teacher, and participant in the communities which affected my development.

Remember the Cinderella story? The one where the wicked stepsisters cut off their toes and heels to fit into the small slipper so that they might have the chance to marry the prince and live happily ever after? What’s wrong with this picture? For over 25 years, feminist artists have been trying to address generally unexamined cultural codes which liminally and subliminally restrict the bodies, activities, and behavior of girls and women. According to Raven (1988), “Artists who address gender and society today are no longer compelled by the perfect feminine fit. A large body of work examines the construction of the small shoe (the social body) on the one hand, and the dismembered foot (the physical body) on the other” (p. 228).

Communities construct the social body, i.e., culture, through signs. The arbitrary nature of culture is never apparent until people are exposed to sign systems which depart from their own. By its very nature, culture imposes an assumed unity on a diversity of codes and has a naturalizing function that makes the constructed unity appear as given and enduring. Feminist artwork purposefully calls into question the nature of sign systems and into conversation routinely unexamined cultural signs.