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Discussing art community and the library

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What is Community?

To initiate a discussion on community and its manifestations in the art world, I will begin with an early and deceptively simple definition as provided by Aristotle:

> Every community is an association of some kind and every community is established with a view to some good; for everyone always acts in order to obtain that which they think good.[1]

Overlooking the complex ethical question of what is "good," I will instead, focus on the term "association" or rather, that which allows a random assortment of beings to cease being random and begin being associated. As a basic and admittedly rather arbitrary premise, I will assert that a collection of beings thrown together in close proximity is not a community and that there cannot be communal connectedness without some sort of interaction or "association."[2] The British critic, Christopher Ricks, suggests that communication is at the core of this social phenomenon:

> When a language creates—as it does —a community within the present, it does so only by courtesy of a community between the present and the past.[3]

Not only does language help individuals to break through existential isolation, but these interactions are tripartite interfaces with one's own world view, the views of others, as well as a culture's accepted mode of behaviour.

What is Communication?

Critic and theorist Jürgen Habermas presents a basic model for communication interactions. An individual must:

> a. utter something understandably;
> b. give [the hearer] something to understand;
> c. make himself [sic] thereby understandable; and

> d. come to an understanding with another person.[4]

Habermas admits that his model overlooks the pantheon of gestures, facial expressions, non-verbal communication and symbols that can be employed in this process. Linguist and activist Noam Chomsky, however, theorizes that privileging written and spoken words is erroneous as they function as approximated surface expressions of deeper ideas which form a "mentally represented grammar."[5] Thus, text and speech are linked to images and symbols in that they both present physical depictions that can only vaguely hint at ideas that have a more profound, cognitive structure.

Communication and community.

Communication is invariably influenced by the psycho-social space within which these interactions exist. After all, an individual can only communicate within a community

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that has "permitted" a certain number of signs, symbols, or utterances to be recognized as giving meaning to one's thoughts. In this light, linguist Ferdinand De Saussure envisions human speech as essentially confined by a reactionary societal context: "Language furnishes the best proof that a law accepted by a community is a thing that is tolerated and not a rule to which all freely consent." He continues:

> Of all social institutions, language is least amenable to initiative.
> It blends with the life of society, and the latter, inert by nature, is a prime conservative force.[6]

Such a restrictive view of linguistics contrasts Chomsky's more fluid conceptualization of deep meaning. Given this new understanding of language, Saussure's "inert" societal regulations are not preordained natural laws but symptoms of a given community's inability to communicate effectively.

Oscar Wilde, the celebrated 19th century author/playwright, who suffered from the doubly alienating conditions of being Irish and homosexual, satirizes this problem:

> Public Opinion ... an attempt to organise the ignorance of the community, and to elevate it to the dignity of physical force.[7]

Wilde indicates that when communities fail to dialogue to create public opinion, they become coercive oligarchies that dictate public opinion. The Victorian conception of same sex liaisons as the "love that dare not speak its name" is a most apt euphemism demonstrating how Victorian culture would simply not discuss homosexuality (nor Irish-ness for that matter), but resorted to legislations, decrees, or edicts to come to terms with this issue. By trying to suppress the words, speech and symbols of this group, the community hoped to deny its existence. The U.S. poet/critic Paul Goodman presents a similar warning:

> When a village ceases to be a community, it becomes oppressive in its narrow conformity. So one becomes an individual and migrates to the city. There, finding others likeminded, one re-establishes a village community. Nowadays only New Yorkers are yokels.[8]

In his conceptualization, the traditional democracy of the village town hall has been supplanted by the pluralism of the urban streetscape.

Russian theorist Mikhail Bakhtin explores how dialogue builds community. In this communicational interaction one takes the thoughts, feelings, impression (world view) of another, compares them with one's own, then both participants form a dialectic synthesis of the two distinct views.[9] This can only happen, however, if there is some sort of power-free public sphere, where individuals may present their world views without fear of repercussion.

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For Bakhtin, the Carnival is the ideal forum for this, as it creates a psychological and physical space in which all power relationships —including gender, class, race, and other societal conceptualizations—are subverted.[10] Bakhtin, then, conceives that a true community is not at all oppressive or conservative, but instead is fluid and ever-changing. It is through dialogue that we play with linguistic or syntactic norms and agree on new ideas, words, concepts and symbols that expand our understanding of ourselves, each other and our communities.

The moment, however, that this progressive process is halted, dialogue turns to monologue. This alternate mode of communication features a hegemonic group that presents their ideas to a public who is unable to comment or critique and, thus, have no choice but to submit to the words of those in power.[11]

Journalist Judith Rodin's 1998 editorial titled "Civilize Public Dialogue and Shape a Better World" notes a distinctly mono-logistic atmosphere in our current public life that she characterizes as "engulfed" by an "explosion of ideological polarization, coarseness, extremism, and intolerance."[12] The domination of our intellectual and academic communities by "political and cultural orthodoxies" invariably leads to a culture of "thoughtlessness, absolutism, selfabsorption, lack of self-restraint and inhibition, and the need for total, immediate victory over one's opponents."[13]

Artists and community.
Poet Allen Ginsberg envisions the creative process as essentially communal:

> Fortunately art is a community effort— a small but select community living in a spiritualized world endeavoring to interpret the wars and the solitudes of the flesh.[14]

Ginsberg, perhaps inadvertently, shows that despite the urge to fraternize, artists often remain isolationist. Thus, the artworks produced by a group of artists may present signs and symbols imbued with meaning for their peers, but these remain unintelligible to the wider community. This affront to conventional views of art certainly challenges the wider public to augment its lexicon of images, symbols or modes of expressing "mentally represented grammar"; however, Bakhtin's theories warn that some reciprocal relationship is necessary in this cultural morphing process. The inability to dialogue beyond the confines of the arts community creates the impression of—to borrow Judith Rodin's words— thoughtlessness, absolutism, and self-absorption. In short, the arts community is seen collectively as a monologistc power.

Where, then, is the power-free zone that facilitates dialogue without fear of reprisal? I will posit—in a most self-serving way—

that the Library is an ideal space for these community-building interactions. Often institutions like the library are described by mythological language that obscures their deeper meaning, as demonstrated by feminist critic Germaine Greer's sense of awed reverence:

> Libraries are reservoirs of strength, grace and wit, reminders of order, calm and continuity, lakes of mental energy, neither warm nor cold, light nor dark. The pleasure they give is steady, unorgastic, reliable, deep and long-lasting. In any library in the world, I am at home, unselfconscious, still and absorbed.[15]

This is indeed flattering, but I would argue that such stereotypical portrayals cloud the more poweeful tenet of intellectual freedom upon which both public and academic libraries are founded. The Canadian Library Association asserts that "all persons in Canada" have the fundamental right to express their thoughts publicly. In the interests of a free dialogue of ideas, libraries must:

guarantee and facilitate access to all expressions of knowledge and intellectual activity, including those which some elements of society may consider to be unconventional, unpopular or unacceptable. To this end, libraries shall acquire and make available the widest variety of materials.[16]

Often in the "calm and continuity" of the Library, we miss the dissonant dialogue of voices that are contained within the neatly ordered, Library of Congress-ized collection. Our physical and social spaces endeavour to remain free from advertising, censorship and monologistic socio-cultural orthodoxies so that individuals may interact with the words, ideas, and symbolic representations of others uninhibited by time, geography, or societal structures. Perhaps this is not the cacophonous carnival envisioned by Bakhtin, but certainly beneath our "lakes of mental energy" lies the power to create dialogue with ourselves, others and our collective pasts in order to create

dialogue with ourselves, others and our collective pasts in order to create relevant, dynamic, and sustainable communities.

The Complete Works of Aristotle, ed. Jonathan Barnes (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985), verse 1252, line 1

Dictionaries such as Merriam-Webster define community as an "interacting population." In the realm of health care, G. W. Steuart describes "A 'catchment area' or 'population' is not considered a community but a geographic entity (e.g., city, county) that has a population aggregate with numerical but not a functional meaning." Steuart, G.W., "Social and cultural perspectives: Community intervention and mental health" Health Education Quarterly (1993, Supplement 1): S99–S111.

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Jürgen Habermas, Communciation and the Evolution of Society, trans. Thomas McCarthy. (London: Heinenmann, 1979), p.2.

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Paul Goodman, "Winter and Spring 1956-1957," Five Years (New York: Vintage Books, 1969), sect. xiii, p. 94.

Mikhail Bakhtin, "Discourse in the Novel," The Critical Tradition, ed. David Richter (New York: Bedford Books, 1989), p. 783.

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Ibid.

Allen Ginsberg, "Mexico and Return to U.S.," Journals: Early Fifties Early Sixties, ed. Gordon Ball. (New York: Grove Press, 1977), entry for July 11, 1954, p. 78.

Germaine Greer, "Still in Melbourne, January 1987," Daddy, We Hardly Knew You (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1990), p. 70.

Canadian Library Association, "Mission, Values and Operating Principles," http://www.cla.ca/about/mission.htm (accessed 2 April 2003).