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The Ethnographic Move in Contemporary Art: What Does it Mean for Art Education?

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The recent shift in contemporary art of artists using ethnography as an integral component in their artistic practice opens a range of issues regarding the relationship between experience in the field, interpretation, and artistic representation. Through a focused investigation of site-specific art, I discuss the problems with "pseudo-ethnography" and the possibilities of alternative models of artist as ethnographers. I read the artworks of three women artists who I argue provide another model of artist as ethnographer, one that represents experience as relationally constituted and a resource for critical reflection. Contemplating the relationship between art and ethnography, I explore its implications for art education.

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Ethnography, a process of inquiry and a "written representation of culture" (Van Maanen, 1988), draws its legitimacy and increased popularity in art education because of its attention to the particularities of experience (Bresler, 1994; Stokrocki, 1997; Wolcott 1988). Based on considerable experience in the field, researchers in art education have studied the culture of schools, the culture of particular art classes, or the art of different cultures. Many art educators committed to multiculturalism encourage the ethnographic process not only within the research arena but also in art classrooms as a pedagogical approach (Chalmers, 1981; Stuhr & Leptak, 1990, Wasson, Stuhr, & Petrovich-Mwaniki, 1990). The ethnographic process has certainly gained currency in art education. In recent decades, there has been an increase in reflective and critical inquiries on the part of art educators on the ethical and political responsibilities of doing ethnography, the issues of power involved in the written representation of culture, collaboration, the complex relationship between insider and outsider, the researcher's social and theoretical position, and the style of writing the ethnographic document such as voice, choice of metaphors, organization of the text, personal expression (Bresler, 1994; LaPierre & Zimmerman, 1997; Stuhr, Krug & Scott 1995; Stokrocki, 1991). Using photographs, drawings, and video as tools in qualitative research, art educators have broadened the boundaries of ethnography to include the visual as primary data, thereby focusing on the notion of visual ethnography (Stokrocki, 1984, 1985; LaChapelle, 1999). However, little has been written about the recent shift in contemporary art, which Hal Foster (1999) calls the "artist as ethnographer." This turn to ethnography by artists signals the current epistemological shifts in art from the artists as object makers to artists as "facilitators, educators, coordinators and bureaucrats" (Kwon, 1997, p. 103) and I would add, archeologists and ethnographers. What the last two decades in site-specific art have highlighted is that artists no longer

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simply produce art objects but often provide "critical aesthetic services" (Kwon, 1997, p. 103). What then does this shift say about art? If we link visual art and ethnography we then need to follow Kamala Visweswaran's (1994) exploration of the relationship between ethnography and literature and investigate not only what art is, but also what is ethnography? And, furthermore, what do these current changes in art mean for art education practices?

I take up these questions through an investigation of contemporary aesthetic practices under the rubric site-specific art, which includes public art, community-based art, and installation art. This investigation commences by mapping site-specific art historically in order to tease out some of the issues it raises regarding the dialectical relationship between the site or location and art object or event, which in turn can call for the use of ethnography. The primary thrust of this essay is to locate the ways in which artists who deliberately choose to use ethnography as a crucial component of their artistic process negotiate issues of representation in their work and its relationship to artistic authority. I focus on selected artworks and the artistic process of three women artists: Sheila de Brettiville, Peggy Diggs, and Jackie Brookner. Each of these artists in interviews I conducted with them draws attention to the complex and problematic relationship between experience, interpretation, and representation.[1] Contemplating this dynamic relationship of "site" in both visual art and ethnography requires us to rethink the site of art education, a task I take on later in this essay.

[1]In an earlier article (2000), I argued that intrinsic to these artists' artistic process was the use of oral history. I analyzed their works within the context of oral history, defined broadly as stories people tell. Subsequently, in an interview with Sheila de Brettiville, she corrected my understanding of her method: "I think that it's more an ethnographic method than it is purely oral history, that it both documents as well as interviews" (personal communication, May 25, 2000). I have revised my position. The term "ethnography" is a more appropriate descriptor of these artists' work. The fact that some of these artists choose to describe their work as ethnography rather than oral history, however, does not imply that the work cannot be categorized under oral history.

Site-Specific Art and Ethnography

Situating the move to ethnography in art requires at the very least a momentary glance back to the 1970s and 1980s; a time when critical theory was linked to art. This turn to critical theory in art was fueled by the social movements of feminism, civil rights, and gay liberation, which encouraged artists to confront the hegemony of art institutions, resulting in the subsequent dismantling of limited definitions of art, artists, audience, and community. Various aesthetic practices emerged under categories which no doubt overlap, such as public art, site-specific art, community-based art, and performance art. These art practices challenged among other things the idea of a self-referential art object that stood apart from its context or location, artistic authority, the canonization of specific art mediums and the transcendental quality of a work of art that determined its universal appeal. These new practices inserted art into the wider cultural field—the primary domain of study in anthropology and sociology.

Site-specific art emerging from the 1960s' minimalism, deliberately dismantled the longstanding separation between the art object and society. For many contemporary artists, the public sphere became an arena for active investigation, ushering different forms of artistic practice that engaged the wider non-art communities in our society. In the 1970s, site-

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specific art was largely confined to an internal critique of the "art system" (Meyers, 2000). The pioneering work of Hans Haacke, Lothar Baumgarten, Michael Asher, Daniel Buren, and other artists focused on exposing the hidden, hierarchical, social, and economic relations governing art institutions, their nationalist agendas and the social construction of the art object as unique, autonomous, and timeless. Subsequently, the social issues of environment, racism, homophobia, gender, sexuality, homelessness, AIDS, to name just a few, have increasingly provided the battleground for artistic interventions. Aesthetic concerns were no longer the primary focus, but rather what Kwon (1997) calls the "discursive," took center stage: "delineated as a field of knowledge, intellectual exchange, or cultural debate" (p. 92). The site for artistic practice encompassed "cultural debates, a theoretical concept, social issues, a political problem, an institutional framework, a community or seasonal event, a historical condition, and even particular forms of desire" (Kwon, 1997, p. 93). Making visible the ways social, economic, political and historical conditions impacted the daily lives of people triggered a different way of working for some artists. Consequently, the artistic process was re-conceptualized. The artist no longer worked in isolation but moved into parks, hospitals, prisons, community organizations, streets and neighborhoods to produce artworks in collaboration with people in these various communities. Art became a forum that opened public dialogue on issues of concern to people.

The artistic process in this broader understanding of site-specific work privileged the collaborative process over art product, placing experience as a cornerstone. The collaborative process obligated artists to become participant-observers in order to better understand the communities they chose to engage with. In other words, artists spent time in communities informally talking to various people, reading about the community and often conducting interviews in hopes of gaining an understanding of the experiences of the community. It is no surprise then, that excavation of stories, objects, and material evidence from the lives of people in various communities required artists to become in a sense ethnographers and/or oral historians.

Foster's (1999) article, "Artist as Ethnographer," argues that the current paradigmatic shift to ethnography in contemporary art is highly problematic as it encourages "pseudo-ethnography," because many artists do not follow the ethnographic methodology in any serious way. Instead, the artist enters a community for a day or week, interviews a few people and then makes site-specific art based on that brief interaction. The impulse of his criticism although extremely important, simplifies the current debates in cultural anthropology on how cultures are represented in texts given the unequal relations of power inherent in ethnography to primarily an emphasis on the written text and issues of narrative style.[2] However, Foster rightly calls into question the ethnographic shift in artistic

[2]See the works of Abu-Lughod (1991), Kamal Visweswaran (1994), Ruth Behar (1996), Renato Rosaldo (1989).

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practice, particularly given the impact of globalization on the art world. Museums, galleries, and cultural institutions now increasingly commission artists to produce site-specific works all over the world. These works cover the gamut from commissioned internal critiques of art institutions, such as the early works of Fred Wilson and Andrea Frazer, to community-based collaborative art projects in specific geographic locations, as is the case with inSITE, a triennial art event that focuses on bi-national collaboration in the San Diego/Tijuana region. Not limited to just museums and galleries, Projecto Axé, a community-based organization in Brazil, invited numerous international artists to work with local homeless children. Based on the experiences of the participants and the locality of the project, the collaboration produced an interactive series of performance, exhibits and objects (Morin, 2000). The proliferation of these commissioned community-based, collaborative works forces us to be reflexive about this institutionalized turn to ethnographic practices. Many famous artists now fly around the globe producing site-specific art in different locations and employ what Foster rightly refers to as pseudo-ethnography, as they do not engage the community in any real way. Foster (1999) writes: "[a]lmost naturally the projects stray from collaboration to self-fashioning, from a decentering of the artist as cultural authority to a remaking of the other in neo-primitivist guise" (p. 197).

I agree with Foster that we need to re-examine critically this trend in the art world of artists doing ethnography, which for the most part does not even begin to address, let alone critique, issues of ethnographic authority, participant-observation, triangulation, thick description of data and other hallmarks of ethnographic methodology. Perhaps the term itself is the wrong nomenclature of this kind of community-based artwork. Nevertheless, the question of the artist's responsibility when using what might be called ethnography to those being represented in the artwork is not an issue about accuracy but rather, about the "power of representation as a historically specific ideology and practice" which is "endemic to the globalizing politics—and increasingly global research—of the modern west" (Farquhar, Masuzawa & Mavor, 1998, p. 1). The problem with pseudo-ethnographies is precisely that the socio-economic and political relations, which underscore the representation, are hidden. Claiming collaboration with people in the field becomes yet another tool artists can use, keeping artistic authority in tact. Although the artist may be "decentered as a cultural authority", he or she does not lose artistic authority, signing off the artwork and thereby claiming authorship.

Despite the proliferation of pseudo-ethnography, some artists have deliberately taken on the role of ethnographers while troubling ethnographic authority by exposing the paradox between the "calm exterior of the representation itself" and process of representation which "involves some degree of violence, decontextualization, miniaturization" of the

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subject (Mariani & Crary 1990, p. 94), while others have deconstructed the ethnographic enterprise. *Mining the Museum*, Fred Wilson's well known curatorial excavation of the permanent collection at the Maryland Historical Society, is one example that comes to mind (Corin, 1994). This mining told a very different story of Baltimore as the objects of art from the permanent collection chosen by Wilson had never been displayed, raising questions about whose history gets represented in museums. The hidden history of the African-American community laid bare not only the politics of display but the "logic of representation, understood as a presence standing for an absence which authorizes it" (Farquhar, Masuzawa, & Mavor, 1998, p. 1). Interestingly, Wilson was criticized for perpetuating "the conventions of ethnographic analysis (the outside researcher, invited by local authorities, briefly visits the place, collects data, presents results, then moves on)" (Meyers, 2000, p. 28). The primary criticism was that he did not position himself in relation to the community he was representing in the installation. Artists Renee Greene, James Luna, Lan Tuazon, Jimmie Durham, Coco Fusco and Guillermo-Gomez Pena have forced audiences to directly confront the historical relationship between cultural anthropology and colonialism and in doing so, raise questions about both ethnographic authority and artistic authority. These art projects have "engaged the 'politics of representation,' self-reflexively incorporating within the work an acknowledgement of, and critique of, uneven power relations enacted by and through representation" (Kwon, 2000, p. 76).

Ethnography as a method has itself undergone intense self-reflection and criticism. It calls for a practice that acknowledges the dynamics of fieldwork as multi-dimensional, or what Behar (1996) refers to as "vulnerable observer" and the difficulty of interpretation that requires ethnographers to make visible in texts their own role in the production of knowledge (Marcus, 1998). Anthropologists such as Lila Abu-Lughod (1991) have called for strategies for "writing against culture," in order to dislocate the previously held belief that evidence of the anthropologist presence in the culture, established by a sparing use of the first person pronoun in monographs and a sensitive discussion of people's experiences grounded in non-biased perception, established ethnographic authority. She argues that "culture" operates in anthropological discourse to enforce the separations that inevitably carry a sense of hierarchy" (pp. 137-138).

Abu-Lughod is not alone in advocating for an ethnography that focuses on: 1) discourse and practice rather than culture; 2) highlighting the historical, economic, social conditions of ethnographic production; 3) an ethnography that focuses on particulars rather than generalizations; and 4) addressing the positionality of ethnographer and the problems of addressing different audiences (Behar, 1996; Marcus, 1998; Narayan, 1992; Rosaldo, 1989; Visweswaran, 1994).

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A point of convergence in this methodological shift in ethnography is the place of autobiography in the written texts. Judith Okely (1992) argues that "autobiography dismantles the positivist machine," as it refuses the idea of fieldwork as data collection. Instead fieldwork is about "lived interactions, participatory experience and embodied knowledge" (p. 3). Increasingly, anthropologists consider themselves as positioned subjects. They understand that their race, social class, gender, and sexuality play exigent roles in the field, not only in their understanding of others as partial and positioned, but also in terms of how others view them and interact with them. Likewise, these factors affect the differing access to knowledge that their positions engender. This understanding no longer remains hidden but is part of the analysis of culture in many monographs.

Inserting the researcher's autobiography in the text does not relinquish the responsibility of situating the particularities of experience in terms of history and power. Otherwise, as Joan Scott (1991), a historian, cautions, experience simply stands for evidence of reality:

> Making visible the experience of a different group exposes the existence of repressive mechanisms, but not their workings or logic; we know that difference exists, but we don't understand it as relationally constituted. For that we need to attend to the historical processes that, through discourse, position subjects and produces their experiences. It is not individuals who have experiences, but subjects who are constructed through experience. (p. 779)

As Scott asserts, the move to narrate personal experiences of marginality often simply becomes evidence that difference exists. In no way do they help us understand how difference is shaped, how it operates in daily life and how people come to understand their subjective positions. Drawing on the work of Chandra Mohanty, Shari Stone-Mediatore (2000) critiques Scott's position that there is no experience outside of discourse. She asserts that "efforts to remember and renarrate everyday experiences of domination and resistance and to situate these experiences in relation to broader historical phenomena can contribute to an oppositional consciousness that is more than mere counterstance" (p. 117). Similar to Scott, Chandra Mohanty is wary of claims that narratives of "marginal experience" (Stone-Mediatore, 2000) need simply to be expressed because voices of the disenfranchised are not heard or that simply being part of a marginal group legitimizes authorial authority. Rather, as Mohanty (1991) explains, narratives based on everyday experiences need to situate experience within socio-economic and political analysis, at both the local and global level. Furthermore, the narratives that speak about resistance and domination make visible the ways knowledge through experience can lead towards social change and these narratives therefore may be empowering. For many women of color in the United States and other countries, writing about their lived experience is a political act and therefore socio-economic and political analysis is an integral part of the narrative. Gloria Anzaldua

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(1990) eloquently explains, "our survival depends on being creative" and moreover, "creativity is a coping strategy" (p. xxiv).

Layering our understanding of experience as discursively constituted in particular historical contexts with a broader conception of experience based on the narratives of women of color that acknowledge the reflective, critical, and political nature of experience, I believe provides a more useful perspective for reading artworks based on people's experiences. It is within this layered framework of contextualizing experience that the artwork and artistic process of Sheila de Brettiville, Peggy Diggs, and Jackie Brookner provide another model for artist as ethnographer; one that represents experience as relationally constituted and a resource for critical reflection.

The Challenge of Interpreting Experience Through Art

The collaborative process entailed in gaining an understanding of the concerns and experiences of a neighborhood/community or understanding social issues people face as explained by Peggy Diggs, Sheila de Brettiville, and Jackie Brookner hinges on prolonged research and fieldwork at numerous sites. It is through extensive conversations with various people from different socio-economic, generational and ethnic/racial backgrounds and through reading books and documents that these artists get a feel for the place or issue. Listening to people describe their experiences is crucial to their artistic process; however, the appeal to experience is framed within history and linked to power. Each of these artists voices her concern with representing experiences of the "other" as white artists. Knowing that some form of violence to the other is part of such a representational process, these artists seek to minimize the violence by actively engaging the participants in the artistic process. By discussing selected artworks of these artists in relation to their artistic process, it is my intention to delineate the different ways Peggy Diggs, Sheila de Brettiville, and Jackie Brookner intentionally depict the historical, social, economic, and political processes that mold experience and subjectivity, including their own experiences as artist/ethnographers. Additionally, I look at the ways their artworks provide a locus for critical engagement that gestures towards the possibility of developing political consciousness.

Jackie Brooker's installation *Of Earth and Cotton* invites the audience to contemplate the connections between the laboring body, environment, and human beings' basic needs, in this case, clothing. Portraits of feet made of soil are viewed against a backdrop of a video, which documents the cotton pickers' experiences as told to Brookner during the time she sculpted soil to capture their feet, and slides of historical photographs of cotton pickers made during the 1930s for the Resettlement Administration/Farm Security Administration. During 1994-1996, Jackie Brookner traveled south to follow the trail of westward migration of workers in the Cotton Belt, interviewing men and women in six different areas who had picked cotton by hand in the 1930s and 1940s. As the men and women spoke

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about their experiences and memories of picking cotton, Brookner modeled portraits of their feet out of the local soil. The video (shot by another artist) made visible not only the dynamics of the interview, as one saw and heard the questions Brookner asked of the people she met and their responses to the questions, but also, the dynamics of the artistic process as one saw her sitting on the ground in front of the persons being interviewed and sculpting soil to make portraits of their feet.

The juxtaposition of the sculpted feet, video, and commissioned historical photographs (WPA artists such as Ben Shawn took many photographs of the cotton pickers) creates a web of complex and intricate relationships between racialized, social classed and gendered bodies, history, experience, and subjectivity. The bodies of men and women, who worked the cotton plantations as sharecroppers in the south, tell a story of proud, heroic workers in the historical photographs commissioned by the federal government, while the geriatric bodies of the cotton pickers recalling their experiences as they are interviewed tell stories of hardship, toil, and an embodied knowledge of the environment and cotton. Complicated by the body of the artist crouched in front of the cotton pickers focused on a part of their body—their feet, which she sculpts in hope that it will tell us something about the person, much like a portrait—one hears other bodily stories that Jose Esteban Munoz, (1996) calls "ephemeral;" that is, "a kind of evidence of what has transpired, but certainly not the thing itself" (p. 10). The ephemeral stories here speak to the physicality of memory symbolized by the feet. In addition the cotton pickers' bodies on the video, as Brookner eloquently states, "become a map of their lives" (J. Brookner, personal communication, May 25, 2000). Exposing the relational dynamics between experience, interpretation, and representation in the artwork, Brookner forces us to simultaneously confront ethnographic authority and artistic authority. By witnessing the intensity and changing character of moments of communication and silence between Brookner and the cotton pickers, ethnography is problematized. The layering of artistic authority (slides represent the work of many artists, the video artist, and Brookner) ruptures our common sense perception of the artist as a sole author of the work and troubles it.

Sheila de Brettiville speaks not only to the positioning of subjects in history but their relationship to her position as an artist commissioned to represent the diverse experiences of communities in public art projects. In the public art project *Little Tokyo*, sponsored by the Community Redevelopment Agency in Los Angeles, California, de Brettiville captured the living history of the Little Tokyo Historic District through text and images engraved in brass and stainless steel, which were inserted in the concrete sidewalks on the east side of the street. De Brettiville interviewed different generations of Japanese-Americans. Talking about the ethnographic process she says:

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> What happened when I interviewed people is that I began to hear the differences between Japanese-American *Issei*, *Nisei*, *Sansei*. So, I knew that depending on who is the speaker, they were going to tell me a different story. The complex subjectivities of each of these individuals, let alone their position generationally [were] going to be wildly different in terms of their understanding of how American they were, of how accepted they were, what it was to even have a Japanese heritage, let alone to be linked to me [a white woman]. (S. de Brettiville, personal communication, May 25, 2000)[3]

The challenge for de Brettiville was honoring the complexity of multiple identities of the different generations of Japanese-Americans in conjunction with the changing history of this neighborhood. De Brettiville divided the length of the sidewalk into two zones. One zone is marked by six timelines. Five honey-colored bands ran the length of the sidewalk and represented the history of the community from 1890s through the 1940s. Brass inscriptions adorned each entranceway to a building on the block, identifying the buildings use, names of business and the kinds of goods and services, which were offered to the community during each decade. The sixth timeline in dark charcoal black recalls the internment of Japanese-Americans during World War II, marking significant historical incidents, which are cast in steel. The two different metals were chosen because of their different effects, thereby capturing the complexity of Little Tokyo. The decision to use brass was because it would stay bright as long as people walked over it, while stainless steel represented the racism faced by Japanese-Americans during the war (de Brettiville, personal communication, May 25, 2000). In the second zone, alternating gray, white, and red cement sections marked the boundaries of each building. Memories of the different generations living in Little Tokyo are inscribed in the white sections, while the red section contained drawings of various containers (bamboo baskets, wooden crate, and cloth-tied bundle) including Japanese wrappings or *tsutsumi*, designed by Ishii, another artist. These receptacles preserve both the public and private memories of a community that has changed over time.

Reading the sidewalks one hears voices reminiscing about the pleasures of daily routines that created a sense of community, the cultural adaptations that emerged living in their new homeland (such as combining Japanese and American ingredients in traditional food), and the comfort of speaking one's language in Little Tokyo. As one walks through the neighborhood, the largely unspoken history of Japanese-Americans reveals the dark side of American democracy; overt racism, the unjust government Executive Order 9066 of 1942 that closed the businesses in Little Tokyo and forced all the *Neikki* (people of Japanese ancestry) out of their homes and into internment camps and the destruction of civil liberties for Japanese-Americans. Literally entering this artwork as one steps into Little

[3] *Issei* refers to immigrants from Japan; *Nisei* is the children of Japanese immigrants, and *Sansei* is the term used for first generation Japanese-Americans.

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Tokyo allows us to construct for ourselves an understanding of the history of the neighborhood, which adds yet another layer of complexity as we contemplate our experiences in this neighborhood in relation to the different generations of Japanese-Americans. Incorporating the artworks of two Japanese-American artists who were finalists for this commissioned work in her public artwork, de Brettiville like Brookner challenges the notion of sole artistic authorship.

The Hartford Grandmothers' Project (1993-94) initiated by Peggy Diggs, was more than a commentary on crime in the city; it pries open people's everyday experiences to reveal its interconnectedness. The project emerged as a result of an invitation by the Wadsworth Atheneum to create public art in Hartford as a complement to an exhibition of her work. Diggs became interested in the topic of crime in the city of Hartford, Connecticut, after spending time in the city on a weekly basis, reading the local newspapers, and talking to people in the city. The gang-warfare in the city had escalated, and although the press covered the situation, the coverage was largely one-dimensional, with primary focus placed on the gangs themselves. Diggs thought one group who had not been acknowledged by the press were elder women in the inner city who were probably affected by the gang warfare (P. Diggs, personal communication, February 16, 2001).

Diggs interviewed elderly women living in Hartford for almost a year in senior citizen centers, churches, and in their homes, regarding their experiences, views, and feelings about crime in the city. These elderly women felt confined to their homes due to the increase in crime and blamed teenagers for this rise in crime in their neighborhood. Diggs also met with teenagers in housing projects through the Institute of Community Research and via school officials and clergy. She interviewed them regarding their feelings and thoughts about crime and the fact that the elderly women blamed them for it. Based on a call and response theme, scratch-off cards (much like lottery cards) were designed. These cards, along with a full-page description of the project and its evolution, were distributed in the daily newspaper, *The Hartford Courant*, on June 6, 1994. On one side of the card were excerpts from the elderly women's views on the decline of their neighborhood, and on the other side, one had to scratch the surface to reveal direct responses from the teenagers.

The selection of excerpts in the scratch-off cards reveal the complex and contradictory relationship between the lives and experiences of the interviewed elderly women, who are Eastern European, Latina, and African American, in relation to the teenagers, who largely represent the Latina community. An example from the scratch-off card might be useful here; one comment from the interviews with the grandmothers was, "We seniors don't have any effect on anything, on any situations, so there's no point in anticipating problems before they get out of hand." The response to this

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quote from a teenager: "We have much less effect on anything. We got no political power. At least they can vote!" Another 80-year-old woman complained about the state of affairs—to which the response from the teenager was that she got to live to be 80. The grandmothers' experiences of living in the same neighborhood are vastly different from that of the teenagers because of the different social positions these two disenfranchised groups occupy in our society. The exchanges highlight the tensions that have arisen due to the socio-economic changes in the neighborhood over time that have lead to an increase in gang-warfare among teenagers living in the projects, and one can infer, living in poverty.

The ethnographic methodology discussed earlier in this paper is inherently structured by unequal power dynamics between artist/researcher and participants. Negotiating these dynamics between experience and interpretation in terms of power is necessarily a challenge. The relationality between understanding people's experience and interpretation of it in terms of power and history, I suggest is clearly evident in the *kind of collaboration* these artists deliberately ascribe to. Each of these artists views the community they work with as *experts* and this understanding is the force that drives the projects.

These artists create a forum for people to assist them in understanding their communities' experiences and use that exchange to naturally guide the direction of the project. For instance, Diggs asks the participants how they would want their message to be conveyed, thereby involving them in the creative process. In the Hartford Grandmothers' Project the term "lotto" kept surfacing in the interviews she had with both the elderly women and the teenagers. Sheila de Brettiville, given the public nature of her art, gets releases from the people she interviews and therefore everyone knows that selected excerpts will be made public. However, she asks the people interviewed to select the quotes from among ones she writes down in the course of a conversation. Brookner, on the other hand, makes the ethnographic process and the artistic process visible in the video, which then becomes a vital part of the installation. The art projects for all of these artists evolve during the course of the ethnography and many changes occur during the ethnographic process that may not have been part of the initial conceptualization. The artistic process is fluid and not pre-determined, allowing for the participants to be active co-constructors of the projects at multiple levels.

The unspoken, yet pivotal, aspect of collaboration as practiced by these artists is respecting and honoring those interviewed either by including them in the final artwork or allowing them to dictate the shape and form of the artwork. Clearly, the choice of art medium for these artists is open-ended and, in fact, underscores the respectful collaboration they foster with the people whom they interview in their projects. The public nature of Sheila de Brettiville's and Peggy Diggs's artworks deliberately engages a

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wider audience in discussions about issues and experiences. Although Brookner's installation was confined to galleries, she made a concerted effort to make sure that the participants she interviewed came to the gallery opening, generating a different level of discussion than usually transpires in gallery openings. The participants related to the historical photographs as triggers to their own experience picking cotton, noting the time of year and ways cotton was picked which differed from some of their experiences (J. Brookner, personal communication, May 25, 2000)

Each of the artworks described herein document the daily experiences of men and women in different communities within a historical context structured by unequal social relations. Telling these stories of daily struggle and hope or resistance and subordination opens up spaces for critical dialogue and reflection that can lead towards envisioning social change, or other ways of being. The transformative power of these artworks is its subversion of the status quo. These specific artworks illustrate Gloria Anzaldua's position that "creative acts are forms of political activism employing definite aesthetic strategies for resisting dominant cultural norms and are not merely aesthetic exercises" (1990, p. xxiv). Diffusing the boundaries between art and ethnography, these artworks become critical resources, pushing the artist as ethnographer in a social interventionist direction.

What Does This Move to Ethnography in Art Mean for Art Education Practices?

Dismantling several persistent myths regarding art in a multicultural society, Kerry Freedman (1996) provided an alternative framework for art education that emphasized the social production of art, its relationship to cultural context (production and appreciation), the blurred boundaries between high and low art forms, and the salience of a pluralist aesthetics. Arguing against the prevalent belief of art being a universal language that has inherent value and therefore may be understood through formalist aesthetic models, Freedman encouraged art teachers to address the complexities of a multicultural society through a social reconstructive model of multicultural art education. Adopting the use of ethnography to interview artists in students' communities is one method advocated by Freedman and other art educators sensitive to the cultural and social dimension of art (Chalmers, 1981; Congdon, 1989; Freedman, 1996; Stuhr, Petrovich-Mwaniki & Wasson, 1992; Wasson, Stuhr, & Petrovich-Mwaniki, 1990). According to these art educators, ethnography encourages students to become aware of the social dimension of art; that is, understanding who makes art and why, where art is practiced in a community, and what forms it takes. Additionally, they argue that art teachers need to move beyond the consideration of the physicality of the art object per se to a contextualized understanding of the object in terms of the social, political, economic, and cultural conditions of production and appreciation.

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The recent movement in contemporary site-specific art, however, has transformed not only what we consider art and the value we place on artistic authority, but more importantly, the entrenched belief in the artist as object maker. The artist as object maker and the notion of artistic authority are currently unquestionable tenets in art education. I argue that these are additional myths that need to be challenged, given the current shift in the role of the artist from solely object maker to curator, facilitator, consultant, and ethnographer.[4]

I contend that this epistemological shift in contemporary art, calls upon art teachers to begin a critical dialogue with students about the nature of art today and the role of the artist in today's global economy. The reverence for the art object in art education is no longer absolute. Art teachers need to initiate dialogue among their students on the current debates surrounding site-specific art, such as monumentality, artistic authority, site-specific art's relationship to contemporary society, and the ways these practices have influenced and changed visual culture. Needless to say, artists have not totally dismissed making objects. Instead, the traditional idea of the permanent physicality of the art object in many site-specific works is no longer valid. As early as 1973 Lucy Lippard predicated the dematerialization of the art object. The conception of site-specific art has expanded beyond Richard Serra's articulation in defense of *Tilted Arc*, of the inextricable connection between artwork and specific location, what Meyers (2000) calls "literal site" (p. 24). In contrast the site is described as "functional" by Meyers (2000) and "discursive" by Kwon (1997), one that does not necessarily incorporate a physical location and may require its own destruction. "Discursive" or "functional" site-specific art maybe interactive or process-driven, but they are "willfully temporary" (Meyers, 2000), with the only remains often being a photo documentation of the artwork, as in Jackie Brookner's installation *Of Earth and Cotton.*

The enchantment with the romantic ideal of the individual artist working relentlessly in the studio expressing his or her feelings and thoughts is unequivocally demonstrated in the history of art education, particularly after World War II, that led self-expression to be advocated as a major tenet of art education (Freedman, 1987). Equating artistic authority with individualism is still part of art education discourses today. Walking into art classrooms across the country, I am struck by the predominance of individually driven art projects, each with a signature, marking artistic authority. The ubiquitous mural project is for some students the only time in their art education career where they work in collaboration with other students. Discussing collaboration as an effective pedagogical process for the art class, Al Hurwitz (1993) remarked on its sociological and psychological advantages, such as socialization, learning to communicate, consensus building, experiencing the democratic process, cooperative learning, and the aesthetic advantage of considering many

[4]Interestingly, the artist-teacher or teacher as artist has been a long-standing notion in art education. This conception, however is based on the view that many teachers are practicing artists (object makers) who teach. It is not about performing teaching as site-specific art. A significant body of qualitative research in art education focuses on artist-teachers and collaborations between artist-teacher-researcher.

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formalistic variables. Collaborative learning is part of many art curriculums; however, it tends to be largely conceived in terms of citizenship or behaviorist terms, rather than in terms of how unequal power operates in many processes we call collaborative. If we are to encourage true collaboration in art, then we need to rethink the idea of artistic authority as a salient aspect of artmaking.

Art teachers honor and respect the process of making art. The process, however, is defined by an individual student's artistic progress that shows how the student has engaged and developed during the semester. The artistic process is still driven largely by notions of self-expression, creativity, and intuition. Many contemporary artists, who have blurred the boundaries between not only high art and low art, but also art and other disciplines in the social sciences and humanities, have challenged both artistic process and artistic authority. Performing archeology, Mark Dion's artistic process entails urban archeological digs in different parts of the world. Working with a team of local people he spends days excavating a chosen site, such as the Thames River (*Thames River Project*), and then sifting, separating, and cataloging the shards and objects, very similar to the ways archeologists work. The difference between archeologists and Dion's artwork is that the archeological process is on display in the museum/gallery and is an intrinsic part of the artwork in conjunction with the documented artifacts which are displayed.

Broadening the conception of artistic process to include ethnography may be necessary if art education is to remain abreast of contemporary art practices, but art teachers need to be judicious about not perpetuating pseudo-ethnography among our students. Doing ethnography as an integral component of the artistic process in schools is an effective way of connecting curriculum to community. Through active participation in their communities (fieldwork) students are not only motivated to learn but, in the process, develop intellectual, social, and verbal skills. This method also provides an avenue for people in the students' communities to tell their life stories and thereby construct a more nuanced understanding of history, culture, and community. In fact one of the reasons for doing ethnography is that it is a "powerful tool in exploring the insiders' practices and experiences as they are articulated in their own voices" (Bresler, 1994, p. 17). Keeping in mind the impact of globalization and the unequal hierarchies which structure our society and world, it is vital that our art practices do not perpetuate the self-other distinction by encouraging the tourist approach to ethnography or that our collaborations are self-serving. Here, we can turn to the critical reflections on the ethnographic process by art educators, educators, and anthropologists for guidance.

Ethnography is based on the researcher/artist spending time in a community or culture, in other words the field. An inherent assumption of ethnography is that it constructs knowledge about culture. Therefore, the dynamics of fieldwork, analysis of data, and writing the narrative of culture

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requires us to be self-conscious as researchers/artists at each stage of the ethnographic process, in terms of how the field experience is interpreted and represented as either an outsider or belonging to the culture (insider). Art teachers using ethnography as an integral part of their art projects have to examine the taken-for-granted assumptions regarding the ways power operates in each stage of this process. Much of the current literature on ethnography focuses on balancing the inside-outside position, while some recent works challenge this opposition.

Questioning the opposition of insider and outsider anthropologists, Kirin Narayan (1993) draws on her own fieldwork in different parts of India as a "halfie" anthropologist, a terms she uses to describe her own multiple position as a native of India of both Indian and American lineage. She argues that all anthropologists "belong to several communities simultaneously (not least of all the community we were born into and the community of professional academics)." Ethnography, she continues, is now more of a practice that attends to "shifting identities in relationship with the people and issues an anthropologist seeks to represent" (p.30). In a related context, art educators Liora Bresler (1993, 1994), Patricia Stuhr, Don Krug, and Anthony Scott (1995), and Rita Irwin and L. Miller (1997), to name just a few, argue that we are both the subject and object of any inquiry and therefore research is never neutral. They suggest the need to acknowledge and make present in our research that "each view comes from a particular, local perspective" (Bresler, 1993, p. 41), and that both the people we interview and ourselves as ethnographers occupy multiple positions in society. As these art educators in recent decades have suggested, doing ethnography requires us to focus on the specific relationships between the narrated experiences of the people we interview, our interpretation of their stories and the ways we choose to represent their experiences through art as always historically contingent.

The artists discussed in this essay have added to the ongoing dialogue on art and ethnography by calling for reflective practices that keep the specific relationality of experiences central to their work. At a time when globalization and technological advances rupture national and cultural boundaries, artists are increasingly called upon to work in different sites across the world. The artist as ethnographer model may be more than a recent trend, given these changes. It is therefore necessary to remember, given the differential access to power in our society and world, that experience can only be understood relationally. This forces contemporary site-specific art, as Kwon (1997) contends, to negotiate this "relational specificity" that locks in tension the vastly different experiences of people based on their location and position in society. Neither the artists nor art educators using ethnography can overlook this relationality of experience in terms of history and power if their artworks and teaching are to stimulate engaged dialogue with an eye to transforming the forms of domination.

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