

THERE'S NOTHING INFORMAL ABOUT IT

PARTICIPATORY ARTS WITHIN
THE CULTURAL ECOLOGY OF SILICON VALLEY



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with research assistance from Lisa van Diggelen

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Preface

Art is an action that occurs in many places, by many people, and for many reasons. Much art by professional artists and arts institutions is presented in formal arts settings: concert halls, museums, theaters, movie houses, and bookstores. However, much art is also produced by everyday people in informal spaces not typically associated with art: commercial storefronts, a street corner in East San José, a downtown Vietnamese restaurant, and a coffeehouse in Campbell. According to an April 2005 random telephone survey of 1,010 adult residents of Silicon Valley, 55% are active art-makers, often in multiple forms of art: 30% play a musical instrument, 22% engage in creative writing, 19% dance, 18% paint, and 13% draw. On average, four to five hours per week are spent on these activities. Overall, 81% of adults express an interest in the arts, and 37% say that arts activities play a major role in their lives.¹

The motives for all of this art-making are undoubtedly complex. Many people make art for the sheer joy of self-expression. For others, art is spiritual, cathartic, socially engaging, or even patriotic. In 2004, Cultural Initiatives Silicon Valley commissioned a veteran cultural anthropologist, Dr. Pia Moriarty, to examine informal performing arts groups in the massive immigrant communities of Silicon Valley. Dr. Moriarty found (*Immigrant Participatory Arts: An Insight into Community-building in Silicon Valley*) that the driving motivations behind these groups were the maintenance of native country languages and customs, and the reinforcement of family bonds between parents and children.

Clearly, much other informal art-making, among both immigrants and non-immigrants, transpires for other reasons and in a multiplicity of settings. As a means for understanding more about this wealth of participatory culture, Cultural Initiatives commissioned another cultural anthropologist, Dr. Maribel Alvarez, to conduct ethnographic field research in Silicon Valley, and write this report. In her research, Dr. Alvarez explicitly sought out cases of art-making in a range of commercial, non-commercial, as well as nearly invisible settings, and found not only a breadth of motives, but also a strong strain of arts made in conscious counterpoint to the performances, exhibitions, and writings of professional artists, and institutions.

Cultural Initiatives is deeply indebted to Claudine Brown of The Nathan Cummings Foundation and Joan Shigekawa of The Rockefeller Foundation for the early inspiration and support necessary to launch Dr. Alvarez's research. In addition, significant advice and support has been forthcoming from Moy Eng of The William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, Nancy Glaze of The David and Lucile Packard Foundation, John Orders of The James Irvine Foundation, and Adobe Systems Incorporated.

This book is dedicated to the memory of Professor Alan Dundes, one of the world's great folklorists and cultural anthropologists, who died earlier this year in the course of teaching a seminar at Berkeley, where he taught for more than four decades.



John Kreidler
Executive Director

Executive Summary

Creativity is ordinary. It can be found in the most unsuspecting places, rising out of the most contrarian circumstances. Human beings are creative, but not all acts of creation are deemed “artistic” by the same standards, or under the same values. What decisions and social performances must take place in order for creative individuals to call themselves “artists?” What can the politics of naming and valuing artistic processes teach us about human existence? And, what can we learn about art systems and organizations, power and status differences among people, and that elusive but fundamental notion of communal and personal meaning that we call “respect?”

This report contains the findings of a research study that considers these questions, and seeks answers. The investigation was conducted from May through October 2004 in Santa Clara County (population 1.7 million), which is the greater metropolitan area of San José, California. The area under study is a major portion of Silicon Valley, the oft-used term for a 1,500 square mile area of the southern part of the San José/San Francisco Bay Area. The study, commissioned by Cultural Initiatives Silicon Valley, is the fourth in a series of in-depth inquiries examining the full range of arts experiences found locally, and their significance for the community. The investigation focused specifically on arts experiences and practices that further participation: that is, methods, approaches, and aesthetic opportunities crafted deliberately to advance direct involvement and artistic creation by a broad range of people not conventionally considered “artists” or art insiders. Over a period of six months, investigators immersed themselves into the activities of a select group of art practitioners and social “happenings” in Silicon Valley whose emphasis on direct participation distinguished them from the predominant model of artistic delivery by which artists create art, organizations present artists, and the public reacts to the work presented to them.

The artistic activities described here are almost always hands-on, undertaken by ordinary people with or without formal artistic training, and often take place in public or private spaces not conventionally defined as art venues. They include artistic practices taken up by amateurs and semi-professional practitioners as hobbies or avocations, “folk” expressions of specific cultural communities (ethnic, occupational, gender, age-specific, and other sub-sectors) and the presenting and programming practices of several nonprofit arts organizations.

The study examines three questions:

1. What are the key messages, themes, and attitudes that render these “informal” artistic experiences meaningful for their practitioners and the communities in which they occur?

2. What administrative mechanisms and organizational dynamics are involved in the structuring of this field of independent creative expression?
3. What is the relationship of this independent field of art-making to the predominant mode of artistic delivery today, namely the formally incorporated arts organization model?

Answers to these questions are provided throughout the report through ethnographic vignettes that reveal in rich detail the sustaining ideologies behind a variety of informal arts events and participatory practices. Ethnography is a methodology of the social sciences that emphasizes immersion into a cultural phenomenon and locale with the purpose of producing texts that reveal to outsiders how “reality” is perceived and experienced from the point of view of those inside a particular context or culture. The stories collected through this investigation paint a cumulative picture of a robust world of artistic production in Silicon Valley parallel to—and sometimes submerged under—the established nonprofit arts field and many of its standard operating procedures. By illuminating this alternative arena of cultural production, the report helps to expand discussions about the value of the arts in society. By going beyond circular arguments that limit the definition of who counts as an “artist” and exploring how “culture” as an anthropological term that invokes the aesthetics of everyday life is connected to “art” as a distinct realm of organized social activities, the study gleans new possibilities for fomenting a vibrant cultural community.

The research included in-depth contact with, as well as scanning activities of 17 groups, sites, events, or associations. These groups included: two commercial entities that offer hands-on art making to the general public; several urban, youth-oriented gatherings featuring music, visual arts, and spoken word; Aztec dance circles; a coffee shop serving as a regional folk music venue; a municipal gallery with an open curatorial policy focusing on amateur and self-taught artists; the artistic community at Stanford University; affinity groups encompassing photographers; writers, and web designers who connect through the Internet’s Craigslist, and a sample of approximately 60 local nonprofit arts organizations whose work of cultural production includes a sustained commitment to participatory and amateur art forms.

The study delves into the intricacies, subjectivities, and peculiarities of groups and people who enact their artistic expressions largely on the margins of mainstream cultural institutions and settings in Silicon Valley, including workers at Hewlett-Packard Company and video game enthusiasts. More than describing the internal thought processes of isolated avocational artists, the study reveals how the participatory arts

find expression in groups that seek to play an active role in the public sphere as independent cultural catalysts. The study’s findings conjure a picture of an existing informal arts field in Silicon Valley that is expansive, entrepreneurial, resilient, and adaptive, while at the same time highly idiosyncratic, dispersed, and ephemeral. Practical considerations such as leadership, funding, and venues play as much a role in the informal arts as one would expect in any nonprofit arts setting. Many informal art gatherings toy with the idea of becoming 501(c)(3) nonprofits, perceiving a sense of stability and access to funding otherwise out of their reach. Others explicitly reject the nonprofit model, perceiving it as constraining and antagonistic to the democratic, participatory thrust of their artistic practices.

More than describing the internal thought processes of isolated avocational artists, the study reveals how the participatory arts find expression in groups that seek to play an active role in the public sphere as independent cultural catalysts. The study’s findings conjure a picture of an existing informal arts field in Silicon Valley that is expansive, entrepreneurial, resilient, and adaptive, while at the same time highly idiosyncratic, dispersed, and ephemeral.

In addition, the study reveals an abundance of art-making opportunities freely flowing in commercial settings. These activities draw from, and help sustain themselves through marketplace strategies, even as they focus primarily on niche audiences. As one practitioner put it, “the informal arts are alive and kicking in Silicon Valley,” but their sustainability outside the exigencies of the nonprofit system of cultural production is not as secure as one might think. The study’s findings affirm that these activities thrive with or without the sanction of the arts infrastructure, that they are viable commercially and in their originating cultural contexts, and that in their unique affinity circuits people always find a way to think themselves “creative” and share in the making of art as a meaningful practice. However, gaps and contradictions abound as the discourses of art-speak are applied to interventions that take place outside the codifiable arts policies prevalent in the organized arts field.

The findings of this study are located within a broad contextual discussion about the place of the informal arts in the existing paradigms that rule cultural production in the United States. One important consideration is the high/low distinctions that underwrite the ideology of the artworld as presently constituted, and the ways in which unspoken assumptions about who makes art, for whom, and towards what social ends influence the models of public participation adopted throughout the nonprofit arts field. As a conclusion, any policy intervention designed to foster informal participatory arts in Silicon Valley will do well to begin by seeding those junctures in which non-

profit organizations already cultivate extensive networks and relationships with informal art practices and practitioners. To this end, the study advances three recommendations:

1. **Convene a participatory arts “learning community”** to discuss the implications of the informal arts as a changing paradigm of cultural production and participation locally and nationally;
2. **Codify participatory art practices and sites** through information collected by grantmakers to gain greater knowledge of the myriad of art-making opportunities that incubate inside companies, through affinity groups, and at libraries, community colleges, and recreation centers; and
3. **Capitalize select participatory projects** that broaden participation and reverse the high/low distinction across a variety of social registers, constituencies, and locations.

Networks and exchanges between formal and informal arts are more prevalent and functional than we might have realized previously. As such, these pre-existing conduits present arts policy makers with an opportunity to work within systems of cultural production accountable to larger civic participation goals and interests. Nonetheless, while acknowledging a variety of existing connections between informal/participatory art practices and institutional forms of art programming, the study as a whole urges a fundamental re-thinking of funding priorities and “arts delivery” strategies among arts practitioners and funding agencies today. Less an agenda and a plea to dismantle wholesale the nonprofit arts apparatus, the study’s findings propose an ethical approach to both the making and the sharing of art as one of the last strongholds of our shared humanity.

Are There Other People Like Us? Staging a Conceptual Framework²

Imagine a fast-food chain restaurant located at a busy intersection in a major American city. Then imagine close to a dozen men and women between the ages of 17 and 45 arriving in their highly stylized vintage cars to this location, parking their vehicles strategically to face the major thoroughfare. They let the hours go by while they display their ingeniously modified machines to each other, and to anyone who walks or drives by. The vehicles on display are so stunningly decorated that a poet once called them “butterflies with transmission.”³ This is a scene that can be observed every Friday and Saturday night at the corner of East Santa Clara Avenue and 19th Street in San José, California. In one form or another, here or down the road in another parking lot, gatherings of this sort have been taking place in this West Coast city for more than 40 years.



Mhat V. Meyer, Mercury News Photographs

Lowrider enthusiasts snap pictures of customized cars lifted off the ground during the San José-based *StreetLow Magazine's* one-day show at the McEnery Convention Center.

A self-fashioned aesthetic has defined lowrider cars and lowrider culture across several generations. This defiant ethic blends a unique mix of individuality and collective solidarity, calling attention to itself through “tricked out” cars that glide low and slow down the main city drag. Their material visibility is at the heart of Silicon Valley, and yet it is accompanied by paradoxical social invisibility and a well-crafted official disavowal of the art form and its participants. According to one local report, underneath the popular perceptions that associate lowriders with delinquency “lies an often-unrecognized art of self-expression, hard work, and family tradition” that is an essential part of a thriving vernacular car culture in California.⁴



Lowriders cruising San José's East Santa Clara Avenue

better and brighter ornamentation, managing the antics of new hydraulic tricks, saving money to buy the required materials and labor involved, are all part of a range of symbolic meanings that accumulate beneath the surface of this hyper-real hobby. In the metaphorically coded lowrider universe, the relationship between artistic creation and existential well-being is functional and unmediated: “When I am having a bad day and

I just want to calm down...I get in my car, roll down my windows and put my radio on,” said one lowrider enthusiast.⁵

Something other than the structure that we have become accustomed to recognize as the “artworld” organizes the enthusiasm and investment associated with lowrider’s participatory projects.⁶ Although local car clubs exist and often coordinate social events and charity drives, generally the gathering at 19th and East Santa Clara is self-generated. No one calls the meeting to order, no one writes grant proposals in order to foster this creative outlet, and no outreach or marketing campaign is necessary to spread the word among these self-designated “artists” and their faithful admirers.

The spontaneous display of unusual works of art in the form of lowrider cars in San José is an example of a widespread phenomenon that has intrigued art advocates in recent years. As the 20th century came to a close, policy makers in the arts became preoccupied with an idea that at first seemed nothing more than instinct or hunch: the sense that some-

New mass migrations and demographic adjustments, rapid technological change, and the globalization of commerce are contributing to substantial changes in communities, and are affecting the expressive cultural forms through which individuals and groups explored the meaning of their new realities. Out of these observations grows a recognition among some of the more progressive cultural policy makers in the United States that other forms of “artistic expression, arts enjoyment and arts discourse” beyond the traditional definitions are taking shape both apart from, and in conversation with, the established nonprofit arts field.

For most car owners, lowriding is about showing off an artistic side often obscured by other routine spheres of daily life. The attention garnished on a cherry-red 1970 mod Chevrolet Impala is an essential part of a nexus of relationships that breaks the flow of ordinary life to create instead, by sheer determination, an extra-ordinary achievement. Seeking out the best car parts, drawing up ideas for

thing artistic and participatory beyond the arts field as-we-know-it (namely, the nonprofit 501(c)(3) arts infrastructure) was stirring in communities underneath the radar of the artworld. Some folklorists, anthropologists, and other grassroots cultural workers might find this realization belated on the part of conventional arts gatekeepers. Nonetheless, specific forces have come together at the current moment and in the current social climate that account for this renewed sense of discovery about non-institutional artistic expressions. This recent assessment emerges from the recognition that new mass migrations and demographic adjustments, rapid technological change, and the globalization of commerce are contributing to substantial changes in communities, and are affecting the expressive cultural forms through which individuals and groups explored the meaning of their new realities.⁷ Out of these observations grows a recognition among some of the more progressive cultural policy makers in the United States that other forms of “artistic expression, arts enjoyment and arts discourse” beyond the traditional definitions are taking shape both apart from, and in conversation with, the established nonprofit arts field.⁸

Some of these other forms of artistic engagement (drumming circles, poetry slams, scrapbook circles, as well as commercially-mediated art experiences such as web design and digital video) are manifested in small and localized folk groups or in commercial art venues that constitute new communities of interest, or “communities of meaning,” where the boundaries between art (as in a separate realm of special skills and knowledge) and culture (as in the widespread production of meanings in everyday life) blur. Interest in these unorthodox types of artistic activities signals an emerging, although still relatively subtle, shift in cultural policy among some influential philanthropic institutions in the United States. This shift is marked by an interest in cultural practices more broadly defined across social spheres and less strictly focused on arts programs produced by arts organizations.¹⁰

At neighborhood centers and community colleges across the Silicon Valley; through public libraries, and Parks and Recreation Departments; and by means of various nonprofit channels, people with common avocational artistic interests find each other. Inside the confines of condominiums lining Highway 101 from Gilroy, the “Garlic Capital of the World,” to the region’s venture-capital hub on Sand Hill Road on the Menlo Park/Palo Alto

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border, amateur artists of all sorts create thickly-layered worlds of private enjoyment through the shared experiences of music, paintings, scrapbooks, memoir writing, knitting, tap dancing, quilting, beading, bonsai-tree gardening, and a variety of other activities. In addition, groups like the Saratoga Drama Group, and the Gilbert and Sullivan Society are among several local cultural entities that place value on the arts primarily as an avocational practice.

The sector of the arts community referenced in this discussion has been loosely designated as informal, participatory, amateur, self-taught, outsider, folk, community or unincorporated arts. Regardless of variations in terminology, the object of study to which any and all of these terms refers to is fundamentally the same: artistic activities in which people engage more as direct producers of art, rather than as audience members of professional arts programs, or consumers of products. These activities and modes of engagement are predominantly hands-on, voluntary, shared in a group, casually organized, and often associated with spheres of personal life such as professional, personal, religious, and leisure. Examples of these activities include church choirs, poetry writing circles, musical jams, social dance events, amateur photography and painting, writing groups, quilt making circles, and hip-hop events or “happenings.”

At one level, some of the artistic practices surmised under the labels “informal or participatory arts” resemble the kinds of activities that folklorists and anthropologists usually designate “folk arts.” In one fundamental sense this co-joining of definitions is appropriate. As folklorist Jim Griffith has stated, folklorists use the term “art” not to refer to a specific class of objects but rather “to that aspect of any object that goes beyond the strictly utilitarian and which is intended to give pleasure to maker, viewer, or both.” Similarly, the word “folk” refers to “the object having been made by members of a specific cultural subgroup of the greater society.”¹¹ In delineating a boundary around these kinds of participatory and informal activities in contrast to the staging of more formally organized art exhibits or performances, I am utilizing an approach that looks at various forms of art as culturally relative; that is: products and practices defined as worthy, well-executed, beautiful, and so forth by self-authorized communities of interest that may or may not mind how art-trained connoisseurs would judge or assign value to “works of art.” By virtue of their relativism and embeddedness in specific cultural contexts and by favoring principles of “pleasure,” social meaning and significance and not necessarily those of intellectual authority, these forms of artistic expression can be considered vernacular or “folk” practices. In contrast to the informal arts stands other forms of art (classical music, paintings exhibited in museums, canonical literature, etc.) which, in addition to requiring formal instruction, are also forms that by virtue of their hegemonic positions and histories can make claims of universal

worth in the public sphere regardless of how “subcultural” their own production and circulation may be empirically.

Throughout this report, the term “informal arts” is used frequently for two pragmatic reasons. First, it was the term chosen by a previous team of investigators led by Dr. Alaka Wali at the Chicago Center for Arts Policy at Columbia College, who conducted an extensive study of these kinds of practices in the City of Chicago between 2000 and 2002.¹² Dr. Wali has observed that the definition of the informal arts agreed upon by the Chicago research team ultimately had “more to do with the settings in which these activities take place rather than with the type of person who engages in them.”¹³ In other words, whether the practitioners are amateurs or professionals, self-taught or schooled, the people engaging in these kinds of arts experiences mostly do so in what can be called non-art spaces, and in direct contrast to where “formal” activities take place within the artworld’s current organizational format. Frequently, these activities begin at the initiative of the participants themselves, and are not necessarily a part of an art organization’s planned programming efforts.

By framing this study in terms of the definitional parameters of the Chicago study, I was able to add data to the field as a whole, and use the insights gained in Silicon Valley as a basis for comparison and further analytical precision. Secondly, by virtue of being a neologism, the term “informal arts” is not yet riddled with the same set of presumptions and prejudices that other terms such as “folk arts” or “amateur arts” often carry in academic and popular discourses. The overarching term “participatory arts” encompasses equally well the scope of the present investigation, and is used interchangeably with “informal arts” by the investigators and the practitioners interviewed in the study.

As apprehended by the Chicago study and this study, the terms informal and participatory arts reach beyond folkloristic considerations. Certainly it includes folk or communitarian expressions but it also expands the boundaries of the discussion by considering activities that are traditionally excluded from the popular perception of what counts as “folk arts,” namely avocational and/or commercial forms of artistic engagement such as tattooing, cake-decorating, desktop-published zines, and web page designs. In contrast to the rigid boundaries that cast some activities as legitimate objects of attention for arts organizations and deem other types of communitarian activities as *creative but not artistic* in nature, the concept of participatory/informal arts offers a new conceptualization. Specifically, the Chicago study highlighted the existence of an identifiable yet loose set of activities moving along an “informal-to-formal continuum.” This continuum ranges from ephemeral and highly spontaneous activities taking place in unstruc-

tured spaces (basements, parks, coffeehouses, etc.) to long-established formally-organized cultural productions, which are for the most part (1) governed by rules for inclusion; (2) occur in publicly-labeled “arts” spaces; and (3) begin at the initiative and under the direction of arts organizations. Researchers in Chicago found that there is a reciprocal, albeit often unrecognized, relationship between amateur/informal arts and formal arts places and professional artists. Not only do amateur artists continually aspire to improve their skills and are willing to sign up for art classes at museums, conservatories, and community colleges, but professional artists often find employment and leadership roles among aspiring and emergent artists in some of the same settings as well.

As one informant mentioned, the words “informal” and “amateur” are problematic because they “hearken back to ideas that associate what we do with inferior, not-serious, and low-skilled forms of art.” In addition, some described the terms as evoking associations of disorganization and most importantly, as representing a lower level of commitment. For this reason, many people seemed confused when we referred to the “informal arts,” because it was difficult to disassociate the reference to informality from this larger interpretative context.

Surprisingly, more people understood the term “unincorporated” partly because, in the jargon of the arts community, becoming a nonprofit is often referred to simply as “incorporating,” and many of the informal arts practitioners with whom we spoke had become familiar at some point with the process of becoming a nonprofit organization. At a minimum, almost everyone interviewed who was involved in some type of collective artistic project with others in a public setting, had looked into the idea of becoming a 501(c)(3) (another shorthand term with currency in the nonprofit world). Clearly, this was not the case with individuals who searched for direct participation in some of these groups, but who were not in leadership roles within them, or those who accessed artistic participation at commercial venues such as Michael’s Arts & Crafts or Petroglyph (a decorate-your-own-pottery studio in San José). Although, as researchers we found the technical term “unincorporated arts” to be a mouthful, we realized that in its usage people immediately identified a reference to a particular choice of organizational format, and not an association with the value or quality of their chosen art form.

As we interviewed people throughout Silicon Valley, we discovered a hybrid in-between space of artistic creation in which people move with relative ease in and out of formal nonprofit channels of operations, and informal organizational arrangements. In other words, the nonprofit model becomes in some instances, as one informant put it,

a “necessary evil” for legal and financial reasons. However, the model does not influence the art-making activities in these small communities of meaning. One person spoke with a sense of resentment about “incubation programs” that want to teach cultural practitioners how to be “a better and bigger nonprofit.” This same person said, “The reality that works best for us is that we use the nonprofit thing when we need it and forget about it when we don’t, so becoming better at using those [nonprofit management] tools is actually counter-productive to what we want to do with our work.” Clearly, this is not the case with all community-based arts programs and organizations. Nonetheless, participation as a value and method of cultural democracy cannot be assumed *de facto* within the organized field of cultural production. It is fair to say that informal/participatory methods are almost always deliberate. An arts administrator of a local granting agency further explained that the historical emphasis of his agency on “developing organizations” may have come, after all, at the expense of cultivating “artistic and creative development more broadly.” Only within the last couple of years had his institution begun to recognize that “answers to alleged ‘arts development’ problems are not monolithic.” He asked rhetorically: “Will informal participation make the arts sector better?” and then answered his own question, “For the community at large, yes; but I remain skeptical that there is a correlation between more participatory forms and the ‘health’ of arts organizations under the current model.”

As entities within an organized social field, community-based nonprofit arts organizations have played a historic role of mediation between the democratic inclusiveness of definitions of art influenced by the field of anthropology, and the discriminating criteria emanating from the discipline of art history. But, as art development consultant Tom Borrup has observed, the quest of grassroots art centers and artists to perfect methods of implementing ideals of participatory practice, has met a number of inherent difficulties. Borrup speaks specifically about how habit and expediency exert influence on nonprofit arts groups to behave according to organizational models that discard the active participation of the people served “in determining both the form and content of cultural programs and activities.”¹⁴ In place of active engagement and a decision-making role for constituents on matters of art production and creation, most arts institutions operate around a highly structured “service delivery” model that delegates matters of art content and method to “professionals” in the field. The operating principle underneath this generalized practice evolved from broader societal dynamics of structuration and bureaucratic management beginning in the early part of the 20th century.¹⁵

For a long time, social scientists spoke of society as divided primarily into two productive sectors: the market or economy, and state or government. When other realms of

social life were considered, the attention focused almost exclusively on family or religious associations. In the span of the last 100 years, however, an important change took place. An identified third sector made up of free associations, philanthropic institutions, and not-for-profit organizations rose up as the pivotal point of citizen participation. This discreetly non-governmental and non-corporate third sector, although dependent for its existence to a large extent on subsidies from both government and the corporate sector, quickly emerged as the authoritative social field that will encompass “key providers of social services, innovators in social reform, funders of new methods of activism, and analysts of public policy.”¹⁶

As the nonprofit sector solidified its particular administrative cultural and organizational infrastructures—partly by making claims of expertise and representing the interests of entire sectors of civil society such as arts, health, and education—a concomitant mythical ideal about the “best practices” to program and run third-sector agencies also began to spread. As a result, a systematic process of professionalization in nonprofit management abetted the tendency to define and see arts issues as intrinsic to arts organizations, and arts problems as the purview of arts advocates. Each sector thus configured, “art” was soon separated from “culture” and while health advocates, educators, and human service providers deepened their interest in the culturally-specific characteristics of the populations they served, artistic matters were for the most part excluded from the scope of cultural concerns. As author Peter Dobkin Hall has argued in his insightful book *Inventing the Nonprofit Sector*, the effects of these truisms was that entire sets of connections between sectors were obscured, and people were divided into “organizational constituencies.” In other words, consumers were for businesses to mind, audiences for arts organizations, artists for art-training academies, and so forth.¹⁷ With time, many human service practitioners and community arts advocates came to recognize that these distinctions between categories have little bearing on how people actually live their lives and relate to service institutions in general. For instance, health practitioners came to understand that many forms of folk medicine and vernacular health knowledge are deeply implicated in aesthetic forms surrounding home gardens, private altars, and women’s leisure activities. Similarly, community-based artists such as California’s Amalia Mesa-Bains saw in immigrant women’s domestic aesthetic practices the raw material of important artistically signifying practices.¹⁸

The connection between everyday life and arts as a manifestation of a vernacular aesthetic sense moves in a direction opposite from the thought of art as a codifiable practice of “professional” nonprofit entities. In this sense, it may appear somewhat commonsensical to state that the informal arts have always existed in one form or another within our communities. After all, we have all known someone who by virtue

of a hobby or an avocation has “fancied” him/herself as an artist, and who has often shared their artistic gifts with others in their immediate family, work, or worship circles. Although a substantial body of research on arts participation has developed during the last few decades, it is not until recently that these practices have become visible to the mainstream arts community. This renewed interest can be partly attributed, paradoxically, to the increased climate of competition for arts funding in the United States over the last 25 years in the face of continued governmental disavowal of responsibility towards guaranteeing an equitable cultural infrastructure as a measure of what constitutes a “good” and moral society. As funding for the arts becomes scarcer, and foundations and corporations feel the pressure of higher demand from multiple, undercapitalized human service sectors, some program officers and trustees have sought to shake the artworld from staid and stale models of arts programming, and have begun to question whether the historic separation between “art” and “culture” ought to be examined and in some cases reversed.¹⁹

Thus, in the last five years, arts policy makers and advocates have begun to consider the possibility that the independent field of informal/participatory artistic activity could hold clues to larger social dynamics, which are implicated in the efforts to sustain and uplift “the arts” in the United States, as well as to the justifications for the public and private support of the arts as a matter of consequence in civil society. One of the implicit consequences of this new line of inquiry could be a re-thinking of many of the assumptions that have underscored cultural policy in the United States for the last half a century. For instance, one could argue that to the extent philanthropic and government support programs for the arts have been designed to this point without taking into consideration a large percentage of activities deemed meaningfully “artistic” by those not associated with the artworld, new funding priorities, or art delivery strategies, may be in order.

Also buttressing the rising interest in changing forms of expressive culture taking place inside the arts community is a parallel track of civic discourse highly interested in cultural themes, which began to take hold of certain opinion circles beginning in the early to mid-1990s as a result of the high-tech boom, and the expanded role of personal

In the last five years, arts policy makers and advocates have begun to consider the possibility that the independent field of informal/participatory artistic activity could hold clues to larger social dynamics, which are implicated in the efforts to sustain and uplift “the arts” in the United States, as well as to the justifications for the public and private support of the arts as a matter of consequence in civil society.

technologies for creative endeavors. Championed by a small, yet earnest and wealthy, liberal intelligentsia, culture and creativity became central filters of social policy. Embodied, perhaps emblematically in the highly successful blend of commerce and “hip” cultural values of companies like Starbucks, a small but influential sector of society sought to connect every aspect of social life with a cultural and creative dimension.²⁰ From urban planning to corporate boardroom architecture to the design of domestic appliances, many elements of everyday life became framed and discussed in terms of innovation, creativity, style, and the benefits of aesthetic experiences in urban development. A cottage industry consisting of the consultants, books, seminars, and gurus associated with this populist turn towards “cultural themes” embraced, in some ways rhetorically and in other ways practically, many of the claims of diversity, multiculturalism, and home-grown aesthetics that community-based arts practitioners had advocated in other contexts and towards broader civil rights concerns since the 1960s. The unintended consequence of this high-tech driven gesture towards greater creative autonomy and democratic aesthetics (embodied in a variety of personal digital technologies and championed from Silicon Valley to the world from companies such as Adobe Systems) was a realignment of some of the assumptions that ruled the traditional patron-driven artworld inherited from the Gilded Age of the late 19th century. In other words, the new high-tech class of creative “nerds” generally showed little interest in joining the boards of large museums and symphony orchestras, and focused instead on questions of inclusivity and pluralism for individual creators and innovators resulting, somewhat randomly, in the opening of doors for new independent digital film makers, graphic designers, video artists, and music mixers, and giving a “home” through myriad Internet sites and chat rooms to many others who, up that point had not dared to call themselves “artists.”

The efforts of the high-tech intelligentsia in realigning the cultural priorities of the artworld’s patrician circles had been preceded a decade earlier by sociological studies on community-building and civic engagement that prescribed competing liberal and conservative versions of the diagnosis, and the desired remedy to overcome a perceived sense of fracture in the American “social contract.”²¹ Seen in a larger context, this public conversation to find redeeming social values in more *authentic* forms of experience—in contrast to forms of alienation brought about by modernity—follows a long genealogy in the social sciences dating back to 17th century reactions to the Enlightenment, and constitutes an ideological undercurrent inherent to most contemporary discussion about pluralism in art.²² Although a consideration of these historical and ideological precedents is beyond the scope of the current study, it is important to note how the ideas prevalent in the “artworld” at different moments are influenced or challenged in varying degrees by a variety of socio-economic contexts or historical junctures that afford these ideas legitimacy and “common sense.”

Silicon Valley is a region that continues to see itself, even post-dot.com bust, as a frontier of creativity, and as such, is a particularly interesting place to examine the ideologies and social dynamics of a changing art paradigm. Recognizing in these national trends and conversations a potential sea change in cultural policy, Cultural Initiatives Silicon Valley commissioned two successive studies to determine the significance of cultural democracy ideas in the local community. The study, *Creative Community Index: Measuring Progress Toward a Vibrant Silicon Valley*, took quantitative stock of the informal arts landscape and resources of the community. *Immigrant Participatory Arts: An Insight into Community-building in the Silicon Valley*, written by cultural anthropologist Dr. Pia Moriarty, followed with a more in-depth examination of the relevance of creativity as a core value for people in Silicon Valley across many conventionally artistic, as well as previously considered non-artistic realms of social life, primarily among ethnic and recent immigrant sectors. Dr. Moriarty’s study demonstrated that the folk practices of immigrant communities function as amply democratic arenas that foster civic participation. This seemingly obvious point opened a new path to understanding the dynamics of a largely overlooked sector of the cultural ecology.²³ Her study and its conclusions were also reminiscent of John Dewey’s observations in the early 20th century of the potential of the arts to humanize, instruct, and broaden the definition of citizenship.²⁴ The Cultural Initiatives’ studies expanded the parameters of the discourse on art-making in Silicon Valley to include a deeper understanding of how individuals maneuver to be creative participants, rather than as passive receivers of art made by others. This watershed acknowledgement pried open a proverbial “can of worms” that challenges us to ask more practical and operational questions about arts making and arts funding in Silicon Valley than have been asked to date.

The present study attempts to probe this lingering set of questions from a pragmatic and organizational derived from the larger discussions outline above. Specifically, the study asks three questions:

1. What are the key messages, themes, and attitudes that render informal/participatory artistic experiences meaningful for their practitioners and the communities in which they occur?
2. What administrative mechanisms and organizational dynamics are involved in the structuring of this field of independent creative expression; and
3. What is the relationship of this independent field of art-making to the predominant mode of artistic delivery today, namely the 501(c)(3) nonprofit arts organization model?

The driving goal of this research was to imagine a Silicon Valley-based initiative aimed at improving the ability of local residents to engage in participatory arts, and what types of interventions are most likely to accomplish this without altering the essential informal and communitarian nature of these practices.

The path to answer these questions was charted by examining in detail the dynamics of a select group of arts practitioners in Silicon Valley who were, for the most part, self-positioned on the margins of the existing arts infrastructure. This study also speculates on the implications that some cultural practices may have on the condition of the arts in general in the region as presently constituted. In particular, the study explores how dynamics of participation and inclusiveness play out in environments beyond the folk communities investigated by Dr. Moriarty. In other words, to what extent must the arts remain necessarily “folk” in nature in

order to be informal and participatory? Or, ostensibly, does this creative and democratic field of arts participation extend through wider circuits? What kind of organizational barriers or opportunities existed for those types of arts activities that tend to take place outside the 501(c)(3) nonprofit model, or alternatively, that take place in connection with, and in opposition to the incorporated nonprofit arts community? The driving goal of this research was to imagine a Silicon Valley-based initiative aimed at improving the ability of local residents to engage in participatory arts, and what types of interventions are most likely to accomplish this without altering the essential informal and communitarian nature of these practices.

In order to obtain this information, both *material* and *symbolic* aspects involved in the production of participatory arts experiences were examined. Materially, I looked at organizational issues such as funding sources, leadership and governance structure, venues, and planning strategies in a select number of informal arts circuits in Silicon Valley. Symbolically, attention was paid to ideological aspects surrounding and grounding these practices. Ideological factors referenced in this report invoke forms of spoken and unspoken knowledge that people carry with them and that, in their view, legitimize certain ways of doing things while allowing the rejection of others. Sometimes ideology can be a distortion, based simply on one's unique interest in reading a situation according to certain similarly interested social positions (class or gender, for instance). But it is also possible to think of ideology as an orienting device to read social messages, and to stake social and moral positions. In this case, ideology had a lot of do with the deliberate decision of many of the informal arts practitioners interviewed to work *outside* the nonprofit artworld while at the same time constituting themselves into relevant actors within a wider network of cultural programming in Silicon Valley. Therefore, I prefer to think of “the ideology of the nonprofit artworld,”

or, in contrast, the ideological posture that stands in opposition to the mainstream as tools of interpretation that help people assess their situations and act accordingly.

In Silicon Valley, a community with an extensive and relatively well-funded and diverse arts infrastructure, those interviewed conveyed a widespread and sophisticated understanding of the basic tenets of philanthropically-supported arts activities. People in the region are very familiar with how the arts exist within a nonprofit universe, with key players, vocabulary, attitudes, and strategies readily identifiable within that self-contained world. For example, one of our informants pointedly expressed a familiarity with the vernacular of the nonprofit arts while simultaneously staking a position outside its reach. She said: “We didn't want to go nonprofit. We didn't want twelve people on a board telling us what to do. The whole granting system is crazy. There are exponentially more nonprofits, yet the funding doesn't grow in proportion to that.”²⁵

The realization of this knowledge among informants was apparent early in the research, and thus led us to pay close attention not only to what people did, but also to *how they talked* about what they did, or did not do. Eventually, I came to hypothesize that talk about arts in the informal realm is highly conditioned by talk that occurs in the formal arts nonprofit world. The discourses of these two realms frame each other, especially in reference to defining insider and outsider positions. In practical terms, the interest in these questions of ideology demanded that Lisa van Diggelen and I tease out perceptions about the existing arts infrastructure during interviews, as well as to document the actual intricacies and peculiarities of grassroots cultural production through which amateur, folk, commercial, and avocational artists go about doing their work in communities.

Fortunately, those interviewed had very definite ideas and a high degree of reflexivity about their position as “unincorporated” or informal arts-makers vis-à-vis the nonprofit cultural establishment. This report will demonstrate that the informal arts practitioners we spoke with had a great deal to say about the definitions, constraints, benefits, contradictions, and complexities of wider debates on “the value of the arts” in society, and were ready and willing to articulate these finer points throughout our multiple conversations.

With the Passion of a Thousand Poets: A Word on Methodology

This research study employed the method of ethnography to collect, analyze, and present data. Ethnographic techniques had their genesis in the field of cultural anthropology. Choosing an ethnographic approach implies the researcher's commitment to let the phenomenon under study become illuminated, understood, and felt *from the point of view* of those who are the subjects of the study. Staking out this position does not mean that the researcher starts out without a hypothesis or a theoretical orientation. Rather, the formulation of conclusions is deeply informed, and modified when necessary, based on what the ethnographer observes, hears, documents, and generally gathers from the people he or she meets personally, and gets to know meaningfully. Further, the type of data obtained is primarily qualitative, therefore description and a high level of detail are necessary to "tell a story" most likely previously untold. The findings reported here are based on the actual in-depth recording of behaviors, ideas, expressions, and contexts of the people studied, and not from some extrapolation of hearsay or presupposition.

Therefore, to collect informal arts data in Silicon Valley, we relied on a technique called participant-observation. Observations were recorded in the form of field notes, and we tried to the extent possible to immerse ourselves in the everyday context of the activities taking place. This meant that we attended events, joined in naturally-occurring conversations, signed up for classes, made pottery, had meals at appropriate research sites, and generally "hung out" with the people whose viewpoints and practices we wanted to understand.

In addition, we conducted open-ended, semi-structured interviews with a select group of informal arts practitioners, most of which we were able to record, then transcribe. To achieve data triangulation (cross-checking and multiple perspectives), we also conducted an online survey of 80 arts organizations with a 25% response rate; collected and reviewed a wide range of available documents and public records (flyers, websites, newspaper stories, etc.); attended a number of additional related events and/or visited related places with the purpose of scanning the field of investigation; and interviewed both formally and informally select key figures in the arts and cultural community of Silicon Valley.

Research was divided into two distinct tracks. First-tier research consisted of a core *field investigation* of eight pre-selected arts activities or entities considered archetypical of the kinds of informal arts practiced in Santa Clara County, and that represented a cross-section of organizational models, art forms, and communities of interest, or of cultural origin. In order to facilitate comparison and to identify key recurring dynamics of operation, we made an effort to maintain a degree of continuity with the kinds

of questions asked during the semi-structured interviews with key informants from these eight source groups. The topics around which we consistently asked questions included: group leadership; relationships between internal members or participants; relationships with external entities or larger constituency; relationships to and ideas about the nonprofit arts community; sources of funding, facilities and venues; perceived barriers and opportunities; and a "wish list."

Below is a chart describing the key archetypical characteristics of the groups and activities researched during "**Tier 1: Core Field Investigation.**"

| GROUP/ ENTITY STUDIED | ART FORM(S) | DESCRIPTION | ORGANIZATIONAL MODEL | CULTURAL FOLK GROUP(S) |
|------------------------------------|--------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Petroglyph | Ceramics | Walk-in, fee-based ceramic studio where people decorate pottery, which is fired on-site | Commercial (independently owned) | Suburban, upper-middle class neighborhoods, families and children, Caucasian |
| Michael's Arts & Crafts | Crafts | Large commercial store for arts and crafts supplies with extensive roster of classes for amateur artists | Commercial (chain) | Suburban mall, multi-ethnic, predominately Latino in East San José, women, homemakers, multi-economic scale |
| Espresso Garden & Café | Music | Coffee house and sandwich shop that regularly presents "folk music" events and productions; only one of its kind in Silicon Valley; well-known among niche audience of followers/enthusiasts | Commercial (independently owned), amateur to professional, independent artists | Suburban, strip mall, folk and acoustic music (multi-ethnic, predominantly Caucasian), middle and lower middle class, middle-aged men and women |
| Tezkatlipoka Danza Azteca | Dance/ folk ritual | One of at least five other similar groups in Santa Clara County, combination of health awareness group (aerobic exercise), cultural ritual, mutual aid and performance troupe | Independent collective, organized around a leader or master teacher | Chicano and Mexican immigrants, Spanish-speaking, middle and low income, inner city neighborhood, women and youth |

| GROUP/ ENTITY STUDIED | ART FORM(S) | DESCRIPTION | ORGANIZATIONAL MODEL | CULTURAL FOLK GROUP(S) |
|-------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Anno Domini | Visual arts primarily, also DJ music, graphic design | Monthly “event” at a warehouse turned graphic design studio turned impromptu gallery that produces t-shirts from artists’ work | Independent collective, artists, cultural entrepreneurs | Urban, youth, middle class, art students, multi-ethnic |
| Pacific Art Collective | Music (DJ and live), spoken word, visual arts | Monthly “happening” that moves around to different sites with large group of followers/enthusiasts, mixing of genres and art forms, where artists are key constituency | Independent collective, artists, cultural entrepreneurs | Deliberately multi-ethnic, some hip-hop elements mixed with mainstream arts, middle and upper middle class, urban |
| 5th Element | DJ music, spoken word, visual arts (graffiti) and hip-hop dance | Sponsor of occasional events at different sites, where members of the collective present own work, as well as that of some guest artists | Independent collective, artists | Women’s hip-hop community, Latina and Asian, also multi-ethnic, students, middle and lower middle class, urban |
| Fierce Words Tender | Poetry, acoustic music | Monthly open mic poetry readings, with women’s music at different sites that has long term followers | Independent collective, artists, convened by lead poet | Women, lesbians, middle class, white, some multi-ethnic, suburban |

Our “second-tier” research consisted of “scanning” activities that rely on the analysis of secondary data sources without personal in-depth contact. In this category of analysis, we focused on nine realms or arenas of informal arts activities throughout Silicon Valley. We obtained information on these second-tier activities and entities by reviewing documents and records, engaging in casual conversations at select events, visually observing settings and dynamics, and keeping a file of “interesting odds and ends” that came our way during the research phase. The decision to split the pool of potential sources of information along these two tiers was based on the limits of time and resources.

The places, activities, and groups examined during “**Tier 2: Scanning of the Field**” are listed below:

- City of Milpitas Municipal Gallery
- Multiple affinity groups found on the “craigslist” online bulletin board
- Neighborhood storefront art space in San José, “Art of the Sun Studio and Gallery”
- Stanford University campus art community
- Silicon Valley corporate employee art groups (Hewlett-Packard Company, Adobe, others)
- Quong Da Vietnamese Restaurant and Gallery
- Lowriders and their custom cars, informal gatherings on East Santa Clara Avenue in San José
- The Knitting Arts store in the City of Saratoga
- Arts Council Silicon Valley (“Community Arts Fund” grant program)

An ethnographic description of the field of informal arts in Silicon Valley unfolds in the pages that follow through an analytical, rather than a descriptive frame. The discussion is not based on in-depth reporting of specific case studies, but rather on a wider assessment of the field constituted by endemic categories that resulted from the analysis of the data. Ethnographic materials informed the analysis and the creation of these categories; throughout the report, select ethnographic vistas are provided to support points of discussion. Sometimes, a single case is used to delve into the dynamics of a specific finding; at other times, multiple examples with a common thread are introduced into the discussion. In general, the discussions move from a broader to a narrower focus, paying initial attention to the greater abstracted findings, then considering the concrete factors of the cited examples.

Basically Open-Minded People: The Secret Artistic Life of Silicon Valley

The Silicon Valley is said to have been birthed into existence by da Vinci-type visionaries. As Arts Council Silicon Valley pointedly suggests in their literature, “the creativity necessary to sustain the region’s growth stems not only from education in traditional disciplines like science and math, but in the arts as well.” A well-honed organizational culture of creativity and innovation has been cemented among Silicon Valley companies and workers. In terms of the traditional parameters of corporate leadership in the arts (i.e., the creation of large endowments for flagship cultural institutions, serving on boards of major art centers, amassing large private art collections and such), Silicon Valley companies and their executives have, for the most part, departed from the patterns of behavior of the early American industrialists and philanthropists. By virtue of being younger and more directly involved in specific areas of social policy related to their unique interests (as opposed to the broad societal “good” envisioned by watershed philanthropists like Ford and Rockefeller), charitable contributions derived from Silicon Valley wealth have tended to be more idiosyncratic and pre-directed. Nonetheless, the arts have fared relatively well in the overall scheme of social needs and goods. In addition to the provision of employee arts programs and financial grants to local nonprofit arts organizations, some companies in Silicon Valley have made it a practice to acquire original works of art to display in their corporate offices, organize rotating arts exhibits in their public spaces, and to integrate their interior designs with aesthetic enjoyment opportunities for workers and clients. Some of the companies that have demonstrated leadership in this area include Varian, Quantum, 3Com, Alza, and Cadence, among others.²⁶ Fueled by more than simply decorative motivations, these activities express a core value of creative engagement shared by many high-tech executives. This commitment is key to the ideology and identity of Silicon Valley. As another statement by Arts Council Silicon Valley stresses, “In Silicon Valley...creativity is our product.”²⁷

In the relatively brief span of Silicon Valley, a pioneering multi-billion dollar company led by Carl Djerassi, inventor of the birth control pill, art collector, and writer, made a unique early and sustained contribution to Silicon Valley’s participatory arts environment. At the pinnacle, the corporate environment at Syntex straddled the line between art as *specialized subfield* and art as *everyday experience*, long before these ideas gained wider popularity. For a period of 19 years, the pharmaceutical giant held an annual “Employee Art Show” at its namesake gallery, located in the company’s corporate headquarters in Palo Alto. According to Carol Dabb, who curated these exhibits in collaboration with an Employee Art Committee, most of the exhibiting artists/employees were amateur, and some sold their art “on the side” while maintaining their day job.²⁸ The exhibits did not display only “art for walls” but also included jewelry, clothing, weaving, ceramics and other crafts. Some of the amateur artists who participated in the

Syntex exhibitions later went on to pursue full time careers in the arts upon retirement. The program ended in 1994 when Roche Corporation acquired the company. An extensive art collection accumulated by Syntex during more than 50 years of existence was catalogued, and now remains in the property of Roche. Although the collection includes work by many prestigious artists, the company did not acquire any works produced by their employee/artists. Today, another large Silicon Valley company, Synopsys Corporation, a world leader in semiconductor design software located in Mountain View, continues the Syntex legacy through the production of an annual employee arts program. According to one source involved in the art program, “the employee shows are very well-received and create good public relations.”

Beyond arts programs, strictly speaking, the notion of creativity has become an important and central postulate among Silicon Valley’s leading thinkers and opinion framers. Comparing Silicon Valley with other places that throughout history spawned life-changing economic and technological innovations, such as Manchester during the Industrial Revolution and Detroit under Henry Ford’s time, author Sir Peter Hall describes the fusion of art and technology here as the kernel of a “civilizational” type of change.²⁹ This kind of analysis has fueled the local formulation of an elaborate ideology of regional identity. This ideology of place and unique cultural attribute has been formulated in large part by analogy—that is, defining the ideals for civil society in terms of high-tech values. Frequently peppering their speeches and essays with “lessons” distilled from the high-tech revolution, local pundits and commentators have found it useful to connect ideals for more animated levels of civic and cultural participation with the creativity at the heart of the high-tech genius of Apple, Cisco, Adobe, Network Associates, Hewlett-Packard and others. The lore is expressed in a simple story: if these companies can alter the course of history by being ingenious creators, so can we (local governmental entities and regional planning bodies) invent ourselves a new modality of civic social relations. In the context of this idealized vision, the arts constitute a fundamental societal good. The goals of such utopian projects, as one report describes them, is to “spark” through a unique combination of wealth, talented and ambitious people, interculturalism and high civic aspirations—“the world’s first true Creative City-Region.”³⁰

The recognition of the role that companies have played in harnessing creativity is part of the Silicon Valley legend. This has been achieved by three main factors: through creative and highly-educated workers, creative products, and artistically-inclined, philanthropically-minded founders and legendary figures.³¹ Each one of these elements has contributed a different piece of the mythical plot that has resulted in the Silicon Valley story and its unprecedented wealth. The arts community’s relationship to this material

and ideological phenomenon has been ambivalent. Unprecedented support for the arts has accrued from Silicon Valley wealth, and yet given the sizes of the fortunes, one often hears comments that the support has been proportionally small. This assertion forms part of the Silicon Valley established art community's own "folk" knowledge. Yet, what has not been considered more broadly in the arts community's relationship to Silicon Valley industries is the way that specific subjectivities that lean toward anarchic (informal) artistic inclinations have also been conceived, nurtured, incubated, and produced inside the Valley's corporate culture.

Given this complex and layered rhetorical framework, what are the implications of a high-tech corporate mentality on the participatory arts? Is there anything specifically "da Vinci-like" about how the average resident and worker in Silicon Valley relates to the cultural and artistic life of his or her community? If it is true, as one individual stated, that creativity in the corporate field "is the one arena in our community in which risk-taking is looked upon with favor," then how are these values materialized in terms of hands-on creativity and artistic participation? Our research suggests that one important effect of this ideological orientation can be detected in the formation of a peculiar maverick sensibility toward art-making among the Valley's self-proclaimed artists. This sensibility is notably marked by a distrust of institutions and traditional "service delivery models." As such, our inquiry also suggests that although rich in creative inclinations, the "da Vinci" type arts practitioners who fancy themselves as "artists" behind cubicle walls across the Valley can also turn out to be a group difficult to enroll as conventional arts audiences through traditional mainstream arts practices.

This peculiar dynamic creates a nerve-wrecking conundrum for arts advocates locally: why would computer engineers here buy classical music CDs, listen to classical music radio stations, be avid music fans through their individualized iPods, maybe even want their children to take piano and violin lessons, but would be reluctant to become season subscribers or major donors of the local symphony orchestra? One possible answer to this question lies in the Valley's own brand of entrepreneurial spirit colored by a somewhat restless and impudent corporate culture.

Up to now, few arts advocates in Silicon Valley have taken notice of, or examined the links between the Valley's idiosyncratic entrepreneurial ideology and particular modes of artistic engagement *and* disengagement. Within the ideological and cultural predisposition considered necessary for the implosion of technological and economic achievement in Silicon Valley, Sir Peter Hall identifies three key characteristics: (1) a "heroic tradition" of individuals inventing, innovating and taking the lead to build new industries and new social formations; (2) "outsider" inventors and entrepreneurs

who tend to be people from the middle-class and often self-taught; and (3) adherence to and belief in "creative destruction," the processes by which new practices and social dynamics displace older ways.³² Our research findings reveal that these same values and characteristics are emulated and upheld by informal art practitioners and participation-oriented arts programmers.

The data gathered suggests that informal arts practitioners in Silicon Valley pick up ideologies emanating from the Valley's corporate discourse, and refashion them into proposals for individual and collective participation in the arts that are not always favorable to the institutionalized formats of the nonprofit arts system. The Valley's corporate ideology and myth of origin emphasize a "break" from tradition, and a tendency to be suspicious of "old school" institutions. For the most part these ideologies favor informality and chide highbrow social relations. Informal artists in Silicon Valley, in turn, build on these themes to craft their own independent arts spaces. They formulate proposals for artistic participation that echo the same anti-establishment themes prevalent in the corporate imagery. It is the belief of many interviewed for this study that these independent artistic proposals are in some way as "creatively destructive" in their own small contexts—and for reasons as simple, for example, as the fact that an event occurs at a coffee house rather than a performing arts center—as the impulse that led iconic figures such as Steve Jobs to invent new technologies. In our conversations with independent creative individuals in Silicon Valley we heard repeatedly a correlation of "attitudes" between corporate innovation goals and individual creativity goals, as if the raw material that enables independent thinking in one arena were the same organic ingredient that feeds a similar singularity in the other field.

On the surface, some local arts advocates might read this parallelism between Silicon Valley philosophy and informal/participatory art-making as good news for the arts. Insofar as the arts echo corporate themes, one option is to read this message within the same operational framework of the arts as currently constituted; that is, that the resonance of a discourse of entrepreneurship bodes well for "hooking up" corporate funds to support arts initiatives. Other arts advocates might be more cautious in their read of the analogical thinking that equates corporate zeal with cultural citizenship. Perhaps they will detect in this singular Silicon Valley mixture of idealism and pragmatism a kink in the arts ecology—one that suggests the delicate and treacherous possibility that the arts and the "artworld" may seem to some sectors of the Valley's creative community as one of those "older systems" primed to be "displaced" by new ideas and practices. In other words, the very same ethos that makes the corporate culture of Silicon Valley maverick, informal, entrepreneurial, and independent, sits oddly with the efforts to sustain an arts-establishment in the likes of "old" social systems, such as the patrician efforts that created symphonies and museums towards the end of the 19th century.³³

As an example of how this phenomenon may play out pragmatically, the employee art exhibits and a range of other arts activities hosted by several of the flagship companies in the Valley represent a field of creative engagement largely unexamined in the larger arts discussions about public participation that take place among arts advocates locally. Where in the continuum of local arts engagement do these corporate-based artistic modes of participation fit? Most of the time these activities, wholly supported by company resources, serve a company's internal need for employee cohesion, team spirit, and increased productivity, however, they also serve as outposts of "democratic" arts experiences that complicate the picture of the arts' role in the public sphere. Hewlett-Packard Company (HP), for instance, hosts an HP Symphony and an HP Choir in a Silicon Valley location; a Jazz Band in Boise, Idaho; and a Photography Club and Scrapbook Club at their Houston, Texas site. Along with a large range of sports and other recreational activities, HP considers its efforts in this arena integral to "promoting the *HP Way to play*" (emphasis added) and is explicit in asserting that it sees a direct relationship between "informality" in expressive culture and communication, and the company's "famed HP Way of managing."³⁴

In this sense, companies like Hewlett-Packard constitute a circuit of non-arts venues where amateur artists can find one another and share in a collective, artistic, hands-on experience that may or may not have any bearing or relationship to existing arts organizations dedicated to the same artistic form. The narrative composed by the HP Symphony to describe their history is an instructive text that speaks volumes about how codifications of amateur art-making adjoin corporate values and objectives in a complex interaction with nonprofit arts entities, yet at the same time independently from them.³⁵

Herb Gellis, the HP Symphony's (HPSO) manager and founder, decided to get "serious" about composing classical music as an avocation when he was in his mid-forties. Other than taking ubiquitous piano lessons as a child, he had no formal musical training, but had been improvising at the piano since that age. He decided to take violin lessons, and did so from a member of the San Jose Symphony, his "home town" orchestra, in order to get first hand experience with an important symphonic instrument, and from the point of view of a professional symphony musician. This training led to his involvement in fundraising and consciousness-raising activity for the San Jose Symphony at HP. In late May of 1993, Gellis put on a Performing Arts Faire at the Peppertree Quad area of HP's Cupertino site. The rationale of the Faire was a means to help spread the word about nonprofit performing arts groups in the South Bay (San Francisco Peninsula). During the planning for the Faire in April, Gellis started putting out feelers to see if he could find enough Hewlett-Packard employees to



The HP Symphony performs in Palo Alto at a Hewlett-Packard Company campus.

form an orchestra of sorts that could provide one of the 15-minute entertainment slots as part of the festivities.

Eventually, we gathered about 40 employees... You might wonder what a 'bunch of engineers' would be doing playing in a symphony orchestra! Of course, not all of us are engineers, and actually several have degrees in music. The range of skill levels in the HPSO ranges from beginner to professional. Most of us have played in youth, high school or college orchestras or bands at some time, and are excited to be reviving their skills and interest in their instruments... We also make room for relative beginners... We are also lucky to have several members who play at the professional level. Several do double or triple duty, and play in some of our area's community orchestras and bands. Since we all have 'real' 9-to-5 jobs (and then some), free time to rehearse is a bit dear. In this regard, we try to be as flexible as possible.

As well-crafted storytelling, the genesis and development of the HP Symphony covers all the vital elements that generally define the informal/participatory arts experience:



HP community members convey their enthusiasm.

an avocation turned into a “serious” pursuit; an interest in the arts expressed in admiration and respect toward professional artists and arts organizations; a desire to get involved; long hours and resolute passion; and flexible standards leading to inclusiveness and grassroots solidarity. However, other elements in the story make this a unique Silicon Valley experience as well: the work environment as the cho-

sen site to promote interest in the arts; supportive and accommodating company philosophy and policies regarding pursuit of company-related, after-work activities; a pool of talented and motivated co-workers; the ways and means to create something altogether new—related but different—from the established arts institutions; a strong hands-on and participatory ethic; the viability of sustaining the endeavor; as well as the ability to articulate “the story” as a subtext that echoes and reinforces the region’s corporate tales of maverick experimentation, passionate commitment, hard work, solidarity, and playfulness.

The HP Symphony story highlights an instance where the artistic interest of the informal participants found resonance and initial impetus from the Valley’s arts infrastructure. In some cases, however, the forms of art that interest Silicon Valley workers are not the forms sanctioned by arts organizations. For instance, although most of the

In Silicon Valley, the cutting-edge frontiers of high technology have been havens for idiosyncratic creators, who, in spite of their reputations as math and science “nerds,” found opportunities for unprecedented creativity, and it is fair to say that creative activities in relation to high-technology remain at the center of the Valley’s culture and economic strength.

smaller municipalities in Santa Clara County have some kind of public-access community or civic gallery open to amateur artists, the City of San José does not. Yet, the public investment by the city in arts facilities driven by arts organizations in San José has been substantial. In other words, the majority of dollars allocated for the construction of arts facilities in the area has gone to arts organizations with defined rules of inclusion and exclusion. In the early 1990s, when financial resources for such a project would have been plentiful, I was part of several task forces that discussed the idea of a civic gallery in San José. Although the idea circulated for some time among the city’s arts adminis-

trators, nothing came of it. I have to conclude from the results that such a project lacked a perceived strong constituency.³⁶ This is not to say that all arts organizations in the region have advocated for their own stability at the expense of broad democratic and participatory publics. In select instances, some arts organizations have directed their attention to groups of amateur grassroots artists, and have created participatory opportunities to harness the interest and energy of informal arts within their programs. In addition, although as a whole the participatory arts have not figured prominently as a topic of interest and discussion among Silicon Valley’s mainstream arts institutions, some significant efforts have come to fruition in the last few years. For instance, the San Jose Museum of Art has worked to “open up” their doors to more inclusive participation through the creation of a free admission policy. At the level of grassroots community-based art organizations, inroads into participatory formats have been even more substantial and inventive.

The informal nature of employee affinity groups, as Hewlett-Packard Company describes this concept for example, may not correspond exactly with the meaning that I have been assigning to the terms “informal” and “participatory” throughout this essay. In the corporate environment informality is seen as an expediency of corporate culture in the “new economy,” not as an anchor of cultural democracy as the term implies in its civil rights-usage. Yet, at the same time, the meaning of the term does not lose all its power in these corporate environments either: informal and participatory modes of artistic engagement, even inside the corporate halls of Silicon Valley companies, represent a door that grants access to a sense of enjoyment and purpose, both of which result in a more vested investment in a local community and in this case, a peculiar sense of place and meaning, even if ultimately the loyalty accrues to “the company” as a foil for “community.” A large annual employee art show in Denver, Colorado entitled “On My Own Time” drives home the point of these types of programs: workers have a life outside the company that is valued by the company, and working conditions are such that people have “time to play.” The Denver exhibit counts the participation of 12 local companies and, in addition to giving employees the opportunity to create art and show it, they are also involved in awarding a grand prize or “People’s Choice” award to a peer.³⁷ The only requirement imposed on participants is that they use “no kits” to produce their art.³⁸

In Silicon Valley, the cutting-edge frontiers of high technology have been havens for idiosyncratic creators, who, in spite of their reputations as math and science “nerds,” found opportunities for unprecedented creativity, and it is fair to say that *creative* activities in relation to high-technology remain at the center of the Valley’s culture and economic strength. Adobe Systems, for example, headquartered in San José, can easily

What do these independently minded creators stand to “lose” if they join the codified forms of arts experiences available through arts organizations? One answer, we can speculate, is that they will lose the very hands-on, participatory, experimental, risky, self-absorbing and all-consuming traits that cause them to think of themselves as “artists” in the first place.

take credit for “innovations in digital imaging, design, and document technologies” that have “enabled millions of people to leverage the power of visual communications” to such an extent that “today, almost every image we see—on the Internet, on video screens large and small, or translated into print—has been touched by Adobe software.” At last count, more than a half-billion copies of Adobe Acrobat Reader have been distributed worldwide.³⁹

In order to understand the impact of these corporate achievements in everyday contexts, San José State University’s “Silicon Valley Cultures Project” has been studying for 14 years the ways in which

work, family, and technology interact in people’s lives. One of the direct effects of this interaction, the research project has found, is a transfer of “engineering and entrepreneurial approaches to [people’s] understanding of the social world, such that efficiency, utility, instrumentality, and economic rationality become the philosophical underpinnings of the Silicon Valley worldview.”⁴⁰ According to San José State Professor and anthropologist Jan English-Lueck, “In Silicon Valley, people view the daily conflicts of life as ‘social engineering problems’ that can be ‘solved’ if given thoughtful and systematic appraisal.”⁴¹

Similarly, the sensibilities and subjective constructions of self and community enabled by desktop publishing software and other such devices have produced a particular kind of Silicon Valley “public,” and have refracted “arts participation” through particular lenses of independent, self-directed, informal creators who may or may not see their own artistic interests in tandem with the arts infrastructure as currently existing in the nonprofit field. In lieu of an organic solidarity that fosters bonds across social, class, and ethnic differences, as the concept of “social capital” would conjure up in the way in which Harvard Professor Robert Putnam’s proposals suggest, Silicon Valley’s individualized, self-directed ethos of creativity links with, and at the same time grinds against a corporate mythology of self-sufficiency. This linkage is not premeditated or necessarily tangible; it is part of a complex process of social and personal negotiations around meanings and opportunities.

One practical question has been prominent in the mind of arts advocates locally: is there a way of “hooking” these Silicon Valley iconoclasts into the arts community? The

answer perhaps can be expressed in the form of another question: what do these independently minded creators stand to “lose” if they join the codified forms of arts experiences available through arts organizations? One answer, we can speculate, is that they will lose the very hands-on, participatory, experimental, risky, self-absorbing and all-consuming traits that cause them to think of themselves as “artists” in the first place.

A brief review of Stanford University as a core Silicon Valley creative community demonstrates this point. As one observer has noted, “Stanford University’s role in the transformation of the ‘Valley of Heart’s Delight’ into ‘Silicon Valley’ is history, but it is enduring history. Stanford continues to affect the local economy by spawning new and creative ideas, dreams, and ambitions.”⁴² There are at least two levels on which the Stanford community produces and reproduces the narrative that sustains the maverick creative ethos that underscores a vernacular Silicon Valley version of the informal arts: (1) by articulating and validating a high-level intellectual discourse that promotes against-the-grain creativity; and (2) by inventing and stimulating a sense of community among artist-faculty, researchers, and students referential to “the Stanford way,” much in the same way Hewlett-Packard mobilizes the same rhetorical strategy to brand its own kind of business philosophy. Events such as the all-day annual “Art Fair” organized by the Student Organizing Committee for the Arts foment this function by giving people, as one of the organizers put it, “a chance to share their talents that might otherwise go unnoticed.”⁴³ The performances of the 50-plus member University Singers, the 180-plus member Stanford Symphonic Choir, the Memorial Church Choir, the Stanford Early Music Singers, the Stanford Chamber Chorale, and the Stanford Woodwind Quartet among many other similar work-based creative groups, all affirm the vitality and participatory nature of the arts in this localized circuit of relationships.

One original program that links business culture and creativity has received a great deal of attention. For the past 21 years, the course “Personal Creativity in Business” taught by Stanford Graduate School of Business Professor, Michael Ray, is reputed to have included among its alumni some of the best-known figures in Silicon Valley.⁴⁴ Consistent with the themes of innovation and creativity discussed here, the class purports to help students “forget cookie-cutter” business techniques, and helps them instead to “look inside themselves” to “cultivate purpose.”

A fascinating example of the kind of impact that Stanford exercises in framing questions of arts hierarchy and engagement in Silicon Valley took place in early 2004 around the production of an exhibit and a conference dedicated to exploring video games as art. The project tied together multiple levels of cultural/knowledge produc-

tion within the campus, thus making the discourse around the project multi-layered and multi-sited. An exhibit entitled “Fictional Worlds, Virtual Experience” took place at the Cantor Center for Visual Arts, a conference entitled “Story Engines: Storytelling and Computer Games” took place at the Fairchild Auditorium, and the project as whole stemmed from a research project entitled “How They Got Game” by Stanford researchers Tim Lenoir and Henry Lowood, who examined historical board and video games as military narrative accounts.⁴⁵ *The Stanford Daily* reported the range of responses to the exhibit and presenters’ thoughts about the conference in careful detail.⁴⁶ The report drove two points across unequivocally: what constitutes art is debatable, and aesthetic responses to art are increasingly emerging from new, unsuspecting sources and social spaces. As one participant stated, “The video games industry...demands to be noticed and respected.” Can one presume that the same could be said, by extension, of video game users, who in addition to being avid consumers of the form, are also creatively engaged in the graphical richness and detailed storylines? Hence, through the lens of a Stanford-initiated cultural intervention we now can speak about video game consumers as yet another frontier where the informal arts thrive unsuspectingly.⁴⁷

It was clear from the news story that the Stanford-affiliated people involved in this project took pride in being at the forefront of a paradigm-challenging conversation. One professor was quoted as saying, “Video games are a revolution... They are an art form.” A museum curator said, “We expect to be provocative.” A computer science professor contextualized the democratic/pragmatic aesthetics that guided the project: “I often feel that the exhibits at the MOMA or Tate Modern are not exactly ‘museum-worthy’ to my way of thinking, and it is probably best for museums to offer enough variety to please a range of aesthetic tastes.” Describing how video games create “beautiful virtual worlds” that can “affect people in similar ways to other works of art,” the exhibit and conference organizers sought to push the envelope that defines the artistic canon. Yet few of the discussions seemed to address the obvious: even as art, video games engage participants in a distinctively self-directed mode of aesthetic relationship and appeal to a rather “unruly” subcultural creative ethos. As one student researcher commented in another context about a group of computer game aficionados in her high school: they “had started inventing a vocabulary of their own.”⁴⁸

In this sense, the Stanford video game project allows us to glean how the cultural values of the informal/participatory arts—an element that has been described as “everyday genius”—articulate with the modalities and social formations of a place as singular as Silicon Valley. In other words, Silicon Valley and other similar creative centers generate an intellectual discourse that fuses the democratic appeal of the informal arts into

idiosyncratic forms of expression that frequently stand at a distance from the normative forms of art promoted in the conventional nonprofit world. Nothing speaks to this point more eloquently than the Stanford campus lecture series sponsored by the Joint Program in Product Design—a collaborative endeavor between Stanford’s engineering and art departments to encourage the creation of products that are both practical and aesthetically pleasing. The annual lecture series is revealingly entitled “Rulebreakers of the 21st Century,” and presents professionals ranging from wheelchair designers to sex-toy retailers who “have rejected traditional paths to success and instead followed their passion.”⁴⁹ What makes the lectures interesting and popular, however, is not discussions on the technical aspects of design, but rather on the stories that the “rulebreakers” share about their path as cultural iconoclasts who “play,” “create,” and “work” on their own terms by making their own rules, and sometimes forcing entirely new games. As one member of the audience described it, “The best thing I’ve gotten out of these lectures is inspiration.” Inspiration to be artistic, creative and engage the arts into one’s life, certainly, but also these lectures inspire a distrust of the institutions that hold the key to the “artistic world,” as it were. As a matter of principle, these new modes of artistic engagement—video games and other forms of self-directed personalized artistic technologies—run against the grain of traditional artistic and social infrastructures.

The creative dynamics described here do not portend that Silicon Valley “creatives” will turn into disciplined arts supporters. I do not wish to overstate the nature of the cultural gap, but I believe that the analysis indicates the structural and ideological differences that would have to be addressed if the artworld is to be in a position to mine the dispersed energy found in the informal arts sector in this region. Questions about a “phantom” Silicon Valley artistic and participatory public existing parallel to the arts community and marching, so to speak, to the beat of its own drum, become even more complicated when considering another kind of density in informal creative activity: the virtual communities facilitated through Internet contact.

In Silicon Valley, one of the most popular websites for the community of avocational artists to congregate is the online world of craigslist (www.craigslist.org), established in 1995. As described in a recent article in *USA Today*, craigslist is a giant Internet bulletin board where people buy and sell their “stuff,” trade humor and political wisdom, look for dates, seek home repair advice, share their poetry and often just rant...Some call the site a public forum. Others call it a classified market. Many call it an obsession.”⁵⁰ The official description provided in the “about us” section of the website is significantly more down-to-earth, edgy, and humanitarian in tone. The section speaks eloquently about the kind of off-center utopian sentiment so frequently found in vary-

ing flavors of social and political leanings in the corporate, quasi-corporate, and anti-corporate worlds of high-technology. As the brain-child of Craig Newmark, a 48-year old software programmer who, according to the website *really* “grew up wearing a plastic pocket protector and thick black glasses, taped together, the full nerd cliché,” the purpose of the site is to:

- give each other a break; get the word out about everyday, real-world stuff,
- restore the human voice to the Internet, in a humane, non-commercial environment,
- keep things simple, common-sense, down-to-earth, honest, very real,
- provide an alternative to impersonal, big-media sites,
- be inclusive, giving a voice to the disenfranchised, democratizing, and to
- be a collection of communities with similar spirit, not a single monolithic entity.

The hard facts of this idealist endeavor are mind-boggling. It boasts more than two billion total page views per month, with over four million classified ads and one million forums posting each month. Geographically, the website spans 100 cities in 20 countries, and receives 600 hits per second during the busy midday hours.⁵¹ Although postings and searches for jobs, housing, articles for sale, personals, and fora are the most viewed pages, one interesting stop in this communitarian superhighway is the section called “Community,” and within “Community,” the online neighborhood called “Groups.” Among these postings is a steady flow of informal/participatory arts opportunities exchanged freely by Silicon Valley’s aspiring artists. One quick sweep over a period of two weeks found posts from people offering or requesting information about a novel writing group, poetry writing group, beginning acting class, local photo club, Macintosh users group (film, music, and art making), crafts bazaar for a local arts organization gift shop (jewelry, glass, small sculpture, painting, cards, etc.), website development group, spoken word open mic, and an amateur piano group.

Rather than seeking to fill idle time, the people searching for and offering these informal creative opportunities share a point of view about the arts that is thoroughly inclusive and non-hierarchical. As is the case with many other informal artists, strong elements of a philosophy of personal development underwrite the motivation to seek art experiences. An entry announcing the formation of a writing group begins by stating, “Life is full of stories....Come join us for an exploration of your own voice.” The

same entry makes clear that “this is a casual, small group environment.” An individual looking to organize a poetry writing group states, “I’ve often found that my writing is more honest if I remember it is first therapeutic for me, and then for an audience.” An acting class calls for people “who have never taken an acting class” and “are ready to get down to the root of [their] imagination and emotions.”

In the uncharted zones of this online community, being an “amateur” is part of the fun of the artistic experience. The Sunnyvale Photo Club announces their upcoming member’s show in the Triton Museum in Santa Clara, and proudly states: “all artists on display are amateur photographers...and many have developed their talents through their time with the club.” A writer seeking kindred spirits explicitly observes that in the particular writing group that he envisions “there is no aim to publish.” A piano group “of about five people” describes itself as “mainly advanced players” who meet each month “to share what each...has been practicing.” Their announcement on craigslist responds to their decision “to invite more intermediate players to the group at this time.” However, the informal nature of this invitation is also explicitly stated: “these gatherings are not recitals; just informal playing for fun;...you can share a piece you’ve polished, or a piece that you are in the process of learning.” Similarly, the Macintosh Users Group that meets in Milpitas twice a month is “open and free for all individuals, whether novices or professionals.” The purpose of the group is “to have some fun and talk all things Mac” including, the entry explains, “film, music, and art” projects or “just home use.”

Where do people in the world’s high technology zenith go to express their creativity? In laying out the research objectives, it was important to consider the sea of assumptions and mixed messages that circulated about the cultural landscape of Silicon Valley. Boosters painted a rosy picture resembling a Renaissance paradise; detractors equated suburbia and middle class comfort with blandness and reality-TV alienation. Parallel discourses included reports about the competitive, exhausting workaholic culture that zapped workers of their civic engagement potential. As one news report cleverly observed, “many have been lured by Silicon Valley’s sweet siren call, one that promises fun, creativity, and riches in exchange for...your life. Or, at least 80 hours of it, each week.”⁵² More optimistic reports indicated that while it is “true that in terms of fine art, Silicon Valley is not New York, or even L.A...At the center of the global infatuation for high-tech, we’re starting to see stress cracks around the human need for organic interaction.”⁵³

The informal arts, as expressed by ordinary people in the various nonconformist and perplexing pockets and foldings of Silicon Valley corporate and suburban culture, seem

to stake a safe passage out of these polarized perceptions. Silicon Valley is neither paradise, nor barren of hipness and innovation. The region is not, as some have superficially declared, totally “self-absorbed,” but it is staunchly self-directed. The way these conspicuous creative activities happen for at least one sector of the local community is surprising: they take place unsuspectingly, inside the very same suburbia and research parks that seem to many, at first glance, nothing more than contrived systems of self-serving civility. These avocational artistic practices do not take place in a vacuum; they are also structured and to a large extent shaped and limited by the economic forces that, in addition to being economic growth-inducing mechanisms of global dimensions, also constitute self-contained ideological worlds or cultural systems. As the economic dimensions of Silicon Valley expand and contract, the practices of informal/participatory artists here both derive from, and complicate the pervasive mythology about this unique region. These practices affirm a robust sense of human agency and offer hope for egalitarian cultural transformations by representing alternatives to the status quo. At the same time, these social performances depend to a large extent on ideologies of exceptionalism that make the practices difficult to map and integrate into “community-building” agendas.

Creative Sparks: Postulating an Alternative Arts Agenda

The minutes for the May 19, 2003 meeting of the Arts Commission of the City of Milpitas contain a fascinating record of the field of participatory arts in action. As part of its monthly duties, the Commission reviews applications from members of the community interested in exhibiting their artwork at the city-owned Phantom Art Gallery in the lobby of the Milpitas Community Center. The guidelines for applicants are simple: all two-dimensional and three-dimensional visual forms are eligible, artists are limited to one show per year, exhibits last up to two months, and “the artist must supply a sufficient number of pieces for an attractive gallery exhibit.” The exhibition program is open to amateur and professional artists alike. The application does not require the artist to reside in the City of Milpitas to participate, nor does it request information on the artist’s education or exhibition history. Commissioners approve or decline applications for exhibition space based on a 5-point criteria: the art must (1) represent a “new visual art experience for the community, (2) be appropriate for public viewing,” (3) reflect the diversity of the community, (4) evoke a response from the Commissioners, and (5) the artist must have sufficient work available. The subjective elements of the selection process are stated up front and directly. Although none of the criteria for evaluation make mention of artistic quality, Commissioners frequently make comments that suggest that this, too, is an important element of the program. The application of the concept of quality, however, seems pluralistic and inclusive, and the environment in which the criticisms regarding quality are offered is intimate and non-authoritarian. The prospective exhibitor must be present at the meeting for the review, and be prepared to respond to questions from the Commissioners.

From the Commission’s minutes on the day in question, an applicant named Daniel presented a selection of about 25 of his paintings for consideration. The minutes are vague on the details, but euphemisms allude to possible issues of race, ethnicity, class, and aesthetics or lifestyle. One Commissioner asked Daniel if he had “any happier paintings in his repertoire.” Another Commissioner asked if he “had anything appropriate for the Phantom Gallery.” Daniel did not seem to take offense at these questions. He replied that he had other paintings that he thought might be appropriate, and stated that, “I paint what I feel and that’s what the Commission sees in my paintings.” While one Commissioner attempted to bring closure to the presentation by saying he thought Daniel needed “a few more years of experience before showing at the Phantom Gallery,” another Commissioner intervened, and asked that Daniel’s paintings be considered.

The discussion shifted, and another Commissioner stated that Daniel “should be given a chance,” and that the Commission would be limiting the Gallery if they were only trying to “cater to the families bringing in children for preschool” (the preschool being

in the same building as the Gallery). The discussion concluded when a Commissioner asked Daniel if he would be willing to share gallery space “with a couple other young artists in a joint gallery opening,” and Daniel agreed. City staff was subsequently directed to contact art teachers at Milpitas High School to find a couple of “other developing artists” to join Daniel in an upcoming exhibition. The compromise seemed to satisfy the artist’s desire to display his work, as well as resolve the Commissioners’ dilemma over the choice of art that was “appropriate” for a public space.

This exchange of the Milpitas Art Commission captures a milieu of grassroots decision-making rarely exposed in such transparent terms. It is an exchange that reveals some of the ways in which informal and participatory arts opportunities weave themselves across Silicon Valley’s arts’ terrain. Yet, often these interventions go unnoticed. One dominant and detrimental tendency in the American arts field over the last few decades has been to circumscribe the idea of a cultural community only to arts “grantees.” An expanded notion of cultural pluralism demands a systematic questioning of what John Kreidler, Executive Director of Cultural Initiatives Silicon Valley, has discerningly referred to as “the prejudice that prevents us from seeing more than only a partial and skewed view of the arts, and to deny legitimacy to people’s capacity for participation in their own terms.”⁵⁴ The Milpitas Phantom Gallery program is an example of the kind of systematic mechanism—in this case at the level of municipal government—that can be enacted to create an environment specifically designed to foster and promote informal artistic participation.

Art connoisseurs deride paintings that reflect what one feels as a cliché in one case, and offer it as an intellectual assertion of deep significance in another. It is precisely this fracture in the discourse of art and creativity that the informal arts are especially adept at identifying and reformulating.

One barrier to visibility for the informal/participatory arts is that some of the skills and knowledge inherent to amateur and avocational artistic practices are not easily translatable to “art-speak” in the ways many formal arts programmers recognize. But are the two realms of creativity—informal and formal—really so fundamentally different? Daniel’s reference at the Milpitas Art Commission meeting about painting “what he feels” is only one small example of how easily entangled the language of professional and amateur artists can become at any given moment.

They say the same thing, but their words are not presumed to matter in the same way. Art connoisseurs deride paintings that reflect what one feels as a cliché in one case, and offer it as an intellectual assertion of deep significance in another. It is precisely this fracture in the discourse of art and creativity that the informal arts are especially adept at identifying and reformulating.

Besides the question of visibility, another important point surfaced repeatedly throughout the study. Regardless of degree of formality, it was axiomatic among most of the interviewed artists that questions of meaning represent an important connective tissue between art and participation. Meaning is what people seek in their artistic endeavors, whether they started to paint a year ago as an avocation like Daniel, or hold an M.F.A. from a prestigious art school. However, meaning is not an abstraction; it is an accomplishment that gets embodied, felt through, and realized through actual social practices and structures. In other words, people seek to affirm and define meaning for themselves and their communities of interests through their artistic endeavors, but these meanings cannot always be realized. Not only because the quest is personally evasive, but also because social arrangements direct the flow of meaning for some in one direction, while others are directed in another. For example, the case of Daniel’s presentation at the Milpitas Art Commission illustrates how possibilities for finding meaning through public artistic enactments or displays can slide easily between policies crafted to be inclusionary, or policies designed to diminish and regulate participation. Daniel’s pursuit of community meaning through his art could have easily been short-circuited were it not for the deliberate effort of the Commission to *craft* a space informed by a participatory ethic, and hence find a way to make his search for social and personal meaning realizable.

In the discussion of the three key themes that follows, we learn that people in Silicon Valley have definite ideas about how some organizational models for artistic practice foster the creation and apprehension of meaning, while others hinder it. The themes of Visibility and Leadership, Cultural Democracy, and Making-do can help advance a more nuanced understanding of how participants in the informal arts field interpret their own practices. Taken as a whole, these messages suggest the important realizations that the participatory arts in Silicon Valley are constituted through an articulation of difference; that is, the informal arts are an *alternative* to what is dominant and prevalent in the local repertoire of arts offerings. As mentioned earlier, this may appear at one level to be simply a matter of rhetorical preference (i.e., we are not *like you* or *like that*; we seek a different experience) or in some cases, a lack of knowledge about arts opportunities that exist through community nonprofit entities. Yet, on another level, the chosen rhetoric highlights the degree to which a perceived sense of alienation from the arts community affects the artistic choices that entire groups of people in Silicon Valley are making in terms of their involvement with arts organizations.

The quest to be recognized as creative and artistic, personally and socially, was an enduring theme in our interviews. From the middle-aged women who sign up for classes at Michael’s Arts & Crafts stores, to the hip-hop artists who stage musical hap-

penings at downtown bars, people wanted to be heard, seen, and recognized for their artistic aspirations, and felt the need to do it in their own way, by their own hands-on efforts, and in response to an actual, or perceived closure of participatory opportunities in the established arts circuits. The analysis presented here should be regarded as an illumination on particularly troublesome areas of a larger field. There are many people who feel the same urge to create and are motivated by the same creative quest, but who are not distant from arts organizations. As mentioned earlier, many amateur artists are drawn in substantial ways to work for and on behalf of the arts.

Visibility and Leadership The title selected for this report, “There’s Nothing Informal About It,” was spoken by a grassroots arts advocate at a meeting of about 20 nonprofit arts organizations, the majority of which started out as informal/amateur groups, and eventually decided to seek legal nonprofit status as a means of acquiring access to grants and “more stability” for their activities. In expressing his dislike of the term “informal,” this person touched upon one of the key elements that drive people to move from being isolated arts-lovers and avocational artists to come together with other like-minded people to create social participatory opportunities for art-making—the desire for respect and visibility.

Intrinsically connected to this aspect is the need for someone to become a leader, to formally take the initiative and call the group together. Leadership in this context means more than making the logistical arrangements to convene other artists, it also implies becoming, sometimes reluctantly, a sort of public intellectual or “knowledge worker”⁵⁵ who can speak to the semantics and protocols that the informal arts encompass vis-à-vis the established dominant arts infrastructure. Often, individuals cast in these roles of leadership must act as *translators* between the language of the community of practitioners and the language of the world of arts, granting, and administration.

Leadership and the kind of wherewithal required to summon an arts experience or creative community out of obscurity toward visibility are premium qualities admired by informal arts practitioners. At the same time, we heard informal arts practitioners repeatedly express a critique of the existing arts delivery systems and bureaucratic exigencies of the 501(c)(3) nonprofit model that fed their own sense of singularity within the arts ecology of the region. Unincorporated practitioners believe themselves to be, and in most cases truly are, carriers of a radical vision: arts programs should not be “for” the community; they should be “by” the community. The amateur and avocational artists who embrace this philosophy beyond their own personal sphere become more than informal artists, they turn into informal *cultural agents* among circuits of like-minded people, and as such they are called upon to act on that conviction and “make something happen.”

One group that exemplifies the multiple dimensions of these artistically independent and counter-organizational push-and-pull factors is the San José-based Pacific Art Collective, or PAC. Comprised of a group of young, hip-hop-influenced independent artists and producers whose chosen medium of work is what is known as an “event” or “happening,” or, in this case, a “PAC Session.” PAC describes itself as an organization that is “catapulting a contemporary collaborative arts movement.” One of the things that make PAC unique in Silicon Valley is the youth culture in which it is cemented. Hip-hop events and practices have proven resilient in some instances to efforts to discipline them into codified traditional nonprofits while at the same time operating at complex levels of organizational capacity. PAC is especially intriguing. In addition to crafting one of the most sophisticated local public stages for individual informal artists through the idioms of urban, hip, and alternative aesthetics, PAC also makes the audience’s participation interactive and, hence, informally and spontaneously creative in its own right. The very idea that the informal arts can generate specifically animated and participatory audiences—not because the audiences get up and play the instruments necessarily, but because they are charged through the format of the event with an explicit role as suppliers of energy for the artists, and are therefore considered co-creators—opens up a number of promising possibilities for reinvigorating arts communities.

PAC was established in 2002 by local DJ Will Rowan, a former Silicon Valley software and hardware sales manager. More than 50 live events have occurred to date where more than 300 artists—most of them non-professionals (i.e., they do not make a living from their art or they are self-taught, independent, amateurs, or avocational)—have presented their work in a setting that is unlike anything one is likely to have come across before in Silicon Valley. The main characteristic of a PAC Session is the staging of multiple artistic happenings simultaneously under one roof, often at a bar or nightclub. A kind of symbolic excess glues the vision together. A May 2005 PAC Session, for example, included four live music bands, four DJs or Turntableists, two visual artists creating works on site, a spoken word open mic session, and a photography exhibit. PAC boasts about the democratic policy that underwrites their events; according to their website (www.pacificartcollective.com), they highlight “artistic genres equally.” PAC performances have included fashion shows, comedy, light shows, dance performances, and featured interior designers, and video artists, among several others. According to Will, there is an infinite amount of “great, undiscovered art Silicon Valley is producing,” but from his point of view, “there’s a lack of organization within the arts community” that prevents it from seeing it all for the treasure that it really is.⁵⁶ On any given night, a PAC Session might feature an Aztec dance group, a new painter, an unpublished poet, a relatively well-known music band, a dance performance presented by members of the local ballet company, and an amateur comedian bent on political

humor who works as an accountant during the day. Whatever the mix, there is always a host who keeps the audience and artists unified on an explicit declaration of what they “are building together” that evening, and beyond. As a collective performance, a PAC Session touches all the raw buttons of being artistic, and at the same time self-consciously disenfranchised.

Judging from the comments posted on the website by those who attend PAC Sessions in San José, one would almost get the impression that, before PAC, the “Capital of Silicon Valley” was an artistic ghost town. It wasn't, yet PAC convenes people from such invisible spots within the region's creative community that it seems as if they all appeared out of nowhere. The range and enthusiasm of the postings are extraordinary: “One of the best things to happen to San José's cultural scene in the last five years;” “A great service to our creative community;” “I used to think San José had no culture, but now I see that they do;” “What you guys do is a blessing in our current cultural climate that marginalizes artistry and creativity;” “I have lived in San José all my young life and have not, until the past couple of years, seen any movement in the arts.” On the part of artists/participants, the comments express a similar tone of discovery, validation, and social critique: “Thank you for giving us the opportunity...it was a large boost to our confidence;” “I believe in hard work and dedication in what you aspire to have...A PAC Session is the door for that longing in expressing art and talent;” and, “We experienced some really provoking and interesting moments last night in paying witness to the creative process unfolding.”

One of PAC's co-founding members described this conspicuous mix of art and grassroots democracy as the result of tapping into an unacknowledged reservoir of talented artists and enthusiastic aspiring artists and audiences, and labeled it as a “true subcultural event.” Established arts organizations such as the San Jose Repertory Theatre and the San Jose Museum of Art have sought collaborations with PAC in order to “cultivate more meaningful dialogue with younger lovers of art,” as a Museum press release stated recently. Will Rowan has maximized this interest to the benefit of PAC, as these large organizations often serve as venues for the PAC Sessions. Introducing a deliberately managerial voice into his otherwise casual tone, Will states, “By fostering interactive environments...both artists and venues draw new demographic and economic stimulation.” The assimilation of nonprofit artspeak seems to be an inevitable result of PAC's huge success over the last several years, thus raising serious questions about the actual sustainability of the arts as an informal experience once it breaks into a more public and more visible terrain than the small communitarian contexts in which these artistic impulses are first cultivated.

As of June 2004, PAC was earning all its income at the events, except for free publicity through the calendar sections and occasional feature articles in the local newspapers. A year later, the need to receive grants and tax-deductible donations to sustain their activities had grown, and PAC has already incorporated as a nonprofit. Will had accumulated a large personal debt subsidizing the events with his personal credit card, and the same success that PAC had enjoyed for months had grown to the point of needing a full-time coordinator. Will also had another concern in mind, “We need to generate income for people, for the artists.” The more Will described his goals about taking traveling ensembles of artists to other regions and wanting to “focus on youth programs, get into school districts, and do assemblies for kids,” the more PAC's organizational needs began to parallel those of the conventional nonprofit structure. Many venues ask for proof of liability insurance before agreeing to host a PAC Session, and some ask for an advance deposit for food and drinks. Sponsorships have become increasingly important under this scenario. Silent auctions and raffles of work donated by featured artists are used to close the gap in the cost of the productions. Although all these elements are business-as-usual for nonprofit arts organizations, Will still affirms an alternative location within the arts scene: “We are striving for cultural change, in the way people think about art, and the way people interact with each other,” he says.

Cultural Democracy The Aztec Dance troupe, Tezkatlipoka, is one of several dozens of groups in the United States and Mexico that willfully invoke the dance and ritual practices of Mexico's ancient Náhuatl cultures to imagine and craft new contemporary communities of meaning. Currently, there are five active groups operating in San José alone, and it is possible to drop in an Aztec dance rehearsal (*ensayo* in Spanish) every single day of the week.

At one *ensayo* in June 2004, participants—including three men, two young girls, and six women—took positions in two lines, beginners located in the back so that they could follow the more advanced dancers. The *maestra* (teacher) gave instructions in Spanish, and repeated them in English. Men began pounding drums. The actual vibrations caused the lights to flicker in the room as the feet of the attentive dancers began to move. Despite the high level of perceived energy, the repetitive drumbeats were almost meditative, even though children were running in and out of the room, sometimes tugging on their mother's shirts. No one made an issue of these interruptions, and two of the most active boys were the children of the *maestra*. Before the *ensayo* began one of the most advanced dancers explained the elements involved in setting up an altar. And, at one point during the practice, the dancers paid homage to “the four directions.” An essential component of being an Aztec dancer is “the definite respect paid to the ancestors regarding the knowledge they left behind.” At the end of the ses-

sion, participants were invited to gather into a circle, and people made announcements, and expressed gratitude for each other's presence, good health, and spirits.



Dancers from Tezkatlipoka Danza Azteca take part in an ensayo—a dance rehearsal.

Tezkatlipoka describes itself as a “circle,” and this is the organizational form that is most commonly embraced by other Aztec dance groups as well. This group has been in existence for 18 years but it is not incorporated as a 501(c)(3) organization. As stated, there is a central teacher in most instances, and the members of the circle constitute a symbolic family. As a blend of ethnic pride, sociality, and spiritual quest, the Aztec circle is an arena of deeply textured social and personal meanings. Although there is an effort to cultivate the intimacy of a small, tight group, the atmosphere is open and welcoming of newcomers, many of who come in and out of the practice at will. Tezkatlipoka and its leaders, David and Lidia, deliberately seek to hold *ensayos* at neighborhood centers where people from the community can join in at their own comfort level. For the leaders of Tezkatlipoka, this location—the gym of a community center,

for example—is fundamental to their mission. Lidia says, “This is a resource for the neighborhood...a lot of youth and teenagers, or a lot of families coming together, that’s what we are about; and they actually benefit by dancing together, they take that feeling home with them, and it seems to make things a lot calmer.” They are also less strict than other groups about the fine details of the spiritual ceremony because they want people to feel “relaxed” and not intimidated. David states, “My main mission is to get people up and dancing as soon as possible so they can be out in the community, and more people will see them and want to come in.”

Tezkatlipoka, as with other Aztec dance groups, plays an important symbolic role in Chicano and Mexican migrant communities, giving their participants a sense of belonging, social memory, identity, and ethnic pride. Participants join in primarily to learn and practice the dance steps as well as the historical and symbolic significance of

Aztec folklore. Tezkatlipoka also fulfills a few additional social functions that may not be so obvious to the first time or distant observer. These groups constitute mutual aid circles of support, are cultural learning communities usually indebted to a special *maestro* or *maestra*, and offer culturally-specific opportunities for aerobic exercise and health improvement.

Groups like Tezkatlipoka mark an exceptional spot on the cultural community map of Silicon Valley because they are intricately-woven links to the ideals of “cultural democracy.” This notion, as elaborated within the cultural politics of the post-Civil Rights era, speaks to what author Arlene Goldbard calls “a roomy idea” about where “culture” is actually found. As she describes it, “culture is the sum total of human ingenuity... Everyone participates in culture, even those who have no particular interest in art of any variety.”⁵⁷ In the Aztec circle’s unique blend of ritual, ceremony, and dance, one can sense that something other than an artistic paradigm directs the coming-together of the participants. Yet, the expressive forms of this group are manifested in many of the same artistic idioms that we would readily identify with an arts organization. It is in this tension—between not-being an organization, yet deploying cultural values with an organizational community infrastructure—that the informal/participatory arts acquire their limited, yet provocative clout locally. The effects of these deployments manifestly counter the dominant paradigms that rule the arts’ prestige and social capital. In this manner, the informal arts affirm everyone’s voice—a “democracy of taste” as Goldbard has called it. They legitimize personal experience; advance creativity as a source of sub-cultural renewal; and position the “less visible” in the public sphere, not as a phenomena to be “spoken for” through outreach programs, but as a form of testimony about alternative community imaginaries.

Although Goldbard has observed that cultural democracy as a conceptual framework has not yet achieved broad popular exposure or acceptance...it is an idea known primarily to cultural activists, the practices of informal networks of creators and participants, such as the density of Aztec circles in the San José area, establish concrete points of artistic intervention from which we can learn valuable lessons. As Lidia, the Tezkatlipoka *maestra*, put it, “We are pushing the limits of philosophy and psychology, or pushing how people view danza Azteca, or how we should act or should be...and these ways and ideas are not going to live on unless people like us say, ‘Hey, I’m going to do this.’” Although on occasion the arts in Silicon Valley have been described as suffering from an “organic insularity”⁵⁸ that prevents them from realizing the full potential that the technological creativity of the region should endow upon them, our research suggests that other organic ideas are also cultivated here that offer other forms of potential for other kinds of community frameworks. The “other” in these assertions

refers to the potentially insurgent idea that there is no such thing as a “Silicon Valley creative community,” but rather a multiplicity of Silicon Valley communities and creative forms—restless and quirky individuals, and circles of informal creators who refuse to be codified into variants of “official culture.”

Making-do Moving ideals from story and philosophy to specific and concrete activities is another key theme that came up repeatedly from informal arts leaders and avocational artists.

Becoming a reluctant arts programmer, and actively creating a public site for the informal arts in Silicon Valley is partially the story of Judy Hackett, owner of Espresso Garden & Café located on the edge of the cities of Campbell and San José. Espresso Garden is *the* site for folk and acoustic music in Silicon Valley, both for professional and avocational performers. The café is highly respected by local acoustic musicians, and enjoys a national reputation. It also constitutes an underground network for guitar players and folk music lovers who feel that there has not been a recognized and supported community for folk music in Silicon Valley. As one informant stated, “As a group I would say we are rather alienated...the step children of the local arts scene.”

The story of how Judy Hackett came to be the animator of this peculiar place is, as she implied, prosaic. She and her husband previously owned a small coffee and pastry shop in another part of town. When the Espresso Garden & Café came up for sale, they decided it was time to “either grow or go away.” Espresso Garden already had a music program in place when they acquired it, but according to Judy, “it was very small, and we decided that for this place to work, it had to grow.” And grow it did, though they were careful to safeguard its intimate atmosphere. Though Judy and her husband have worked through the ups and downs of the local economy, she feels that they are still not safe from disappearing some day. In addition to musical performances, the café has also hosted a variety of open mic poetry events, which are usually also attended by amateur guitar players and singer-songwriters. Occasionally, the featured program is out of the ordinary from the usual repertoire. “A couple of years ago we even had a magic show;...that was a cool night,” says Judy.

The work of running the café and music programming is sometimes more than Judy bargained for. As on most event evenings, only Judy and her husband work the shift. Judy cooks all the food and attends to the music set-up. Her husband takes orders at the counter, and calls out to entering customers that he was also taking ticket money.

Judy is the programmer, but she also is an informal artist. She says, “I get to cook, and I get to sing, and I get to play with the musicians...we are a real small family business. If I had to run this place without the music, I would sell it in a heartbeat...it’s too much work for too little [financial] return.” Yet, in spite of the work it takes, and the nominal financial profit, Judy feels part of an experience that energizes her and that, in her view, adds important social value. “If you want to talk about culture in this town, talk to the guys who run the open mic series...When we say loose-knit community, that’s what they mean: nobody is in charge. Nobody is the boss, but everybody comes together, and things happen.”

In practical terms, the folk music program at Espresso Garden & Café is vulnerable in a couple of significant ways. Judy implicitly describes the “underbelly” of the informal arts, and states pointedly, “we are not funded by anybody or anything...marketing and PR are weak spots. We are incapable of doing marketing collateral and all that.” And finally, she adds without elaborating, “the neighborhood.” It is also a problem. Despite ample parking and easy access to the freeways, Judy senses that there may be more dynamic urban areas in Silicon Valley where a musical café could thrive. Yet, in what seems like a contradiction, she also claims that something about this location “makes it work.”

In describing her learning curve as an impromptu music programmer, Judy illuminates the pragmatic decisions that underscore the existence of these kinds of public spaces. As with many of our other informants, the Hacketts navigate a terrain fraught with contradictions. As a for-profit business, the couple currently does not make money. If they choose to incorporate the café as a nonprofit, they could be eligible for grants and salary support, but could they operate the nonprofit, enact its mission through its programming, and successfully operate the café to earn additional revenue for the organization? And most of all, the question remains as to where the current owner’s autonomy, and Judy’s personal investment as an artist and leader would fit within a nonprofit structure.

Considering the undercapitalization inherent to most of the informal arts environments examined, the philosophy and skills of “making-do” acquire a great deal of symbolic value in the construction of the participatory arts sector locally. “Making-do” is another way of saying that resourcefulness is one of the great assets of the informal arts field. At the same time, as in the case of PAC, the urge or need to insert themselves more formally into the active nonprofit networks of Silicon Valley through space, money, publicity and know-how, represents a real dilemma for many informal artists.

Almost all practitioners have a considerable fear that upon entering into, as one artist stated, “funding and Boards and that sort of grid,” that they will lack autonomy. After all, most of the people we identified doing informal arts collective-type work in the current cultural scene are creators who want to materialize their vision, and feel the satisfaction of hands-on engagement. Many want to do this but cannot afford the “leap” of leaving their nine-to-five jobs entirely, nor would some of them want to do so. The fine line between arts as avocation (and therefore, personal and private, and unobtrusive in other realms of personal life), and the enactment of public and shared forms of informal participation, was a fundamental tension that ran throughout most of the research case studies.

Insofar as the informal arts public sector in Silicon Valley is spearheaded by *cultural entrepreneurs* like Judy Hackett, David and Lidia, and Will Rowan, their fit within existing cultural infrastructural models remains a fundamental issue to be addressed, or not, by them and nonprofit arts entities. However, nontraditional, publicly-crafted expressive spaces like Espresso Garden grant us access to a “public,” an “audience,” and “communities” of creators that frequently fly under the radar of the artistic field more formally constituted. They do so always with a great deal of passion, and a healthy dose of defiance.

Be Part of This Movement: Informal Arts Infrastructures



At Quang Da Restaurant, a patron enjoys Vietnamese cuisine and MeMo Art Gallery's exhibition.

Eating lunch at Quang Da Restaurant in downtown San José is not anything out of the ordinary, yet one cannot help but to pay attention to one small detail: the walls of the restaurant are covered with paintings for sale. A label that reads, “Our objective is to introduce traditional and contemporary Vietnamese fine art to the world at an affordable price,” accompanies each work of art. A business, perhaps group or organization, by the name of MeMo Gallery claims responsibility for curating the exhibit and promoting the sales. On the day we visited, Lisa and I were the only non-Vietnamese customers at the restaurant. A group of Vietnamese twenty-somethings sitting at the next table observed our awkward attempts to read the menu. Later, we attempted to contact the MeMo Gallery through an email address listed on a business card, but never received a response. Unknowingly, we had stumbled upon a world of art beyond our linguistic, cultural, and intellectual reach.

Pinpointing the coordinates that locate informal art activities in Silicon Valley can be tricky. Ubiquitous and at the same time paradoxically invisible, the informal arts thrive in both predictable and unsuspecting places all over Silicon Valley—in folk communities, at social service agencies, and through commercial entities such as this restaurant, and craft stores where consumers are able to exercise personal choices without having

to subject their aesthetic preferences to high/low valuations. A few random highlights can help us grasp the existence of an alternative geography of artistic participation that we may or may not be familiar with in Silicon Valley.

At the St. James Senior Center located in downtown San José, amateur senior-citizen artists of Chinese descent and recent immigrants from China gathered in one room to learn to sing Chinese Opera, while across the hall another group practiced ballroom dancing.

At the Tandy Leather store, the worlds of professional and hobby leatherwork fuse indistinguishably. A recent newsletter offers a Deluxe Leathercraft Kit with all the materials needed to complete four projects, and a step-by-step video and manual for \$99.99.

The Yellow Pages of Silicon Valley phone books contain dozens of tattoo parlors where talented artists practice, socialize, digress, and frequently make a good living.

Thus far, this investigation has focused on what can be described as the mid-range level of the informal arts field. Instead of studying the inner phenomenological make-up of individual avocational artists or, on the other end of the spectrum, the mechanics of the amateur arts marketplace as an industry, I examined the intersections where individual arts-making transforms into communal projects shared within the public sphere. In this sense, this study has been more interested in avocational *groups* than in avocational *artists* per se. Clearly, the two are integrally connected, but the problems posed by each can appear seemingly incompatible. For avocational artists, the key issue is whether there is something in the social environment that prevents them from accessing what they want to do. Taking into account the multiple points of aesthetic production that we have been able to identify, there is no reason to think that the outlook for avocational artists in Silicon Valley will turn bleak any time soon.

On the other hand, for avocational groups, the question becomes one of articulation within the societal mechanisms, processes, institutions, and protocols that rule artistic production. As sociologist Vera Zolberg has observed, “Unless they make art works only for their own pleasure...artists depend directly or indirectly on social structures that provide them support.”⁵⁹ These support systems, in turn, depend on factors that are not always predictable: the economy, political will, access to deep-pocket patrons, social distinctions of taste, etc. Standing on the edge between institutionalization and autonomy, informal arts groups must contend with material and symbolic “rewards and deprivations”⁶⁰ inherent to the social character of their activities. Rifts in the forms

of money, time, space, and logistical exigencies impact the organizational capacities of informal/participatory artists and cultural agents, and can also make their work singularly exacting and provisional.

In addition to the critiques directed at the formalized nonprofit arts sector from artists who prefer to work on the margins of the system as informal catalysts or provocateurs, there is also evidence of an intensive process of soul-searching about whether becoming a 501(c)(3) nonprofit was “the way to go” to increase the realization of their visions. Equating a nonprofit organization with improved stability may be questionable.

However, while many informal artists are aware of the circular logic implicit in this assumption, many struggle with finding the means to make their art be more than a personalized, ephemeral undertaking.

The anxiety inherent to this debate is related to the same types of issues that eventually make nonprofit arts administrators nervous—time, money, space, and personnel. However, in the case of some informal artists, it also contains an element of conflict with regard to direction and purpose. After all, half the enjoyment of functioning organizationally through circles, happenings, jams, and collectives is the flexibility and the feeling of triumph implicit in “making-do” with volunteers, in-kind donations, and an occasional paid “gig.” On the other hand, not having enough resources is a handicap, inevitably confronted at the very moment that these artists move into projects of a public nature.

The ambivalence produced in discourse and practice by these competing needs can be disconcerting. One young woman states, “When we get some funding, it’s great; when we don’t have funding, life goes on. We just make shows happen. Our biggest vulnerability is working in a collective structure...The off-the-wall concept that everyone has equal input and equal leadership...that is the real challenge.” When asked how this challenge may be addressed, her answer pointed right back to the menu of arts development that informal artists take pleasure in disavowing in the first place, “Maybe if we take more classes *to learn how to sustain an organization*, and get everyone familiar with what it will take to continue, then I think some of those issues will work themselves out.” Her answer also reveals the extent to which informal artists have assimilated the vocabulary of the mainstream artworld into their own discourses.

Based on their recurrence throughout the interviews conducted, three characteristics of the informal arts sector were extrapolated: dispersal, idiosyncrasy, and entrepreneurialism.

The informal arts are dispersed. The field of informal arts in Silicon Valley is constituted by disparate participatory, unincorporated activities scattered across niche communities or constituencies. Describing this field as robust and expansive would be true, but also somewhat misleading. The “field” is a field only as an analytical category, not as a material entity. The motivations and mechanisms for how informal arts activities are conceived and produced in Silicon Valley cannot be mapped in any logical sequence. These activities do not constitute a circuit nor a network properly speaking, yet one can argue that they are interconnected by virtue of the non-arts spaces and contexts in which one is likely to find them. In other words, informal arts activities are only cohesive as a field in reference to what they are not. They are not “art as usual” experiences, and most likely take place at non-arts spaces.

As a “field,” the informal arts resemble and enact dynamics more closely associated with the marketplace, than with the “third-sector” arena of civil society usually attributed to the nonprofit field. Consistent with the market ideology, these clusters of activities tend to self-regulate according to supply and demand; as such, they can also be ephemeral and, as one avocational actor described them, “temperamental” as well.

Although many of the people interviewed knew about other informal arts groups, and sometimes even had direct contact with them, the landscape of the informal arts in Silicon Valley does not have deliberate configurations or order. Informal arts activities cluster around certain favored spaces and forms (crafts at for-profit stores; music and poetry at coffeehouses, bookstores, and night clubs; fine arts at corporate and educational sites; etc.) but generalizing beyond these provisional correlations would not hold up against the evidence. As a “field,” the informal arts resemble and enact dynamics more closely associated with the marketplace, than with the “third-sector” arena of civil society usually attributed to the nonprofit field. Consistent with the market ideology, these clusters of activities tend to self-regulate according to supply

and demand; as such, they can also be ephemeral and, as one avocational actor described them, “temperamental” as well. Their interests are always tempered by day job realities that pull practitioners “in the opposite direction.”

Traveling the short freeway distance from the City of Saratoga to downtown San José, one can find two distinct informal arts sites, neither related to the other, yet oddly similar in the aspirations and niche appeal that each expresses. Stumbling onto these kinds of spaces, whether by strolling along a city street, by word-of-mouth, or by surfing craigslist, is often how people who participate in informal arts activities find them as well. There is no “arts agency” where one can find a directory of informal arts opportu-

nities. Rather, the marketplace of ideas and small business ventures pushes these interventions forward through unstructured channels of communication, and the concomitant “do or die” precept of the business world. An invisible fabric made up of loose strands connects one activity with another, though not in the conventional sense of a network. The fabric is essentially conceptual. Anyone who wishes to get involved can eventually find something, or someone doing something similar. However, the means of finding those venues and activities are serendipitous (a brief note in the company’s newsletter, a tiny mention in the calendar section of the neighborhood paper, a flyer picked up at a bookstore, a list serve, etc.). As the following two snapshots demonstrate, the informal arts ventures that dot the Valley are as diverse as they are dispersed.

Knitting Arts, located on the main street in quaint Saratoga is an upscale boutique craft store that describes its mission as “A place where fibers, people and creativity come together.” On Thursday evenings, the store hosts a “social knitting” group, and on the fourth Wednesday of every month, the Santa Clara County Crochet Meetup gathers to “show off [the] latest project (e.g., baby blanket, hat, bikini?), meet new friends...and share the passion and freedom of crochet.” The store constitutes a community of crafters, representing mostly upper-middle class women, whose coming together touches upon multiple dimensions of sociality and meaning. For instance, in April 2005, the store hosted the first-ever knitting Scarf-A-Thon to benefit the American Cancer Society. Clearly, like many other spaces and projects described in this report, the store functions across multiple dimensions and social needs.

Describing her vision on the store’s website (www.goknit.com), owner Jan Hurwitz describes the store as the purposeful “creation of a knitting community.” She places this community in context, and reclaims a sense of mission by stating, “Knitting is a hundreds year old craft, taught woman to woman, or person to person. This is what happens with all the classes we do...one woman passing on her knowledge and craft to another.” In this way, the store sells more than supplies and classes. And, as a gathering place for this community, Jan also articulates a narrative that resonates with the “Silicon Valley story” elaborated throughout this study. On the website she writes, “Knitting’s popular resurgence includes movie stars and Silicon Valley executives.” A former globe-trotting software company vice president, Jan taught herself to knit ten years ago: “I was in a fast-paced, stressful, high-tech environment. I found knitting gave me a sense of balance and serenity, of being centered—therapy, if you will. I would steal away on my lunch hour and knit. It was the best part of my day. So I joined a group of knitters and learned more from them.” It is clear from the language, the purposeful description of a shared history, and the targeted marketing to a niche public that stores like Knitting Arts constitute communities of interest that script a

large portion of the informal arts in Silicon Valley. As consumers, the visitors to these business sites demand participation and direct accountability to their needs in ways that the “audiences” of the nonprofit arts hardly ever have an opportunity to do. The businesses operate under the same motivating narrative of other participatory arts efforts. That is, they fill a need that no one else is addressing. As such, these strip mall and downtown stores become important creative outlets that serve a self-identified community of passionate arts-lovers and most importantly, arts-makers.

In another substantially less urbane example, in a street corner storefront in a busy poor-to-middle income neighborhood in downtown San José, the Art of the Sun Studio & Gallery had just opened within the last year. It is, essentially, a neighborhood arts center. Owner Paul Fernandes, a local school teacher by day, has nicely renovated the wood-frame structure, and inside a small, but cozy, gallery displays a variety of sculptures and paintings. A flyer at the entrance announces a series of upcoming musical events, including independent bands and light shows. San José is not known for seeding many of these types of neighborhood-based independent art spaces, so it was intriguing that someone, on his own and with no institutional experience or funding and with a “regular job as a school teacher,” could conjure up the energy to create such a space. Paul’s most recently printed flyer listed several summer art classes that the Studio offered for neighborhood youth. The classes included ceramics, theater and puppetry, music, drawing, and mixed media.

A strong independent artistic vision motivates Paul. He tells me that he finally tired of waiting for “things to happen” and “decided to do something.” Paul has many friends—most of them avocational visual artists and musicians who want to do more with their art but have not found a suitable venue for their aspirations. He says, “look around this neighborhood: artists have so much to give back to the community.” Repeatedly Paul states that the Art of the Sun Studio & Gallery sprang up without the benefit of strategic planning, careful analysis of the arts environment locally, or the existing assets and gaps in the neighborhood.

Paul’s work ethic is impulsive, possibly even romantic, and ideal to an interviewer. His vision is grassroots and participatory. But, Paul and the Art of the Sun Studio and Gallery are emblematic of a hybrid middle ground apparent in the informal arts—an informal community dressed up in institutional garb—that I have encountered before among so many of the visionaries injecting participatory incitements into Silicon Valley’s arts scene. To the extent that being “alternative” is defined by these cultural catalysts as non-institutional, the objective reality of running and sustaining an organization or a place clashes with their vision of themselves and their work. Paul mentions

an existing Latino arts space in downtown San José (an established nonprofit in existence for more than 15 years) that he considers “alternative” as well, and wonders how it might be possible to hold on to that “alternative” identity and still be financially stable. I sense that the challenges of paying the rent, holding two jobs, networking with the neighborhood leaders and civic brokers, and sustaining this venue are already taking a toll on Paul Fernandes. How much longer will he will be able to sustain the work? But then again, there are many “Pauls,” and each one more enthusiastic than the other. As San José-based rapper, Encore, has said about his craft, the thing that keeps these artists going is “pretty intangible...it’s a way of life” that cannot be reduced to grants, paperwork, and the like.⁶¹

The informal arts are idiosyncratic. Manuals on nonprofit arts management usually include lessons on how to write a mission statement. Learners are often encouraged to reconcile two seemingly conflicting elements in the wording of their mission statements. That is, they are asked to articulate what their organization specifically does, but also to describe the universal benefit to the community resulting from the organization’s existence. Partly a result of the IRS requirement that a larger public good be served in exchange for being exempt from paying taxes, many nonprofit mission statements are remarkably uniform, and devoid of insider jargon. While this is considered good practice, informal artists seem to love to flaunt their discrepancy against these organizational mandates. Because the majority of informal arts groups serve niche communities—or specialized markets, as some have called them—opportunities to narrow the mission, and the expressive language used to describe it are considerable, and many avocational cultural agents enjoy playing with the semantics that describe their arts. No one plays more ingeniously with semantics than spoken word and hip-hop artists for whom “flipping the script” (not accepting the status quo) are often mantras.

In contrast to nonprofit organizations, informal avocational groups are in a position to program activities to serve their numerically small and self-identified participants. Therefore, the needs of the in-group become more important than any authorization from a moral community external to it. For the same reason, the informal arts arena appeals to art forms and/or groups that, for one reason or another, feel “on the fringe” of the mainstream arts agenda. This would not necessarily be the case with all instances

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of disenfranchisement in the arts world. Many forms of ethnic arts, for example, have been marked by efforts to bridge societal differences and, thus, receive respect and recognition in the arts field as a whole. Arts forms oriented toward issues of sexuality, gender politics, and urban youth cultures have been less interested in signing onto agendas of formalized or institutionalized multiculturalism. Rather, they have articulated nonconformist ideologies, social postures, and vocabularies. Because the goal of many of these informal groups is not to form organizations or secure organizational support

of any kind, the room they grant themselves to be idiosyncratic represents a symbolic space where social defiance and artistic freedom merge.

In Silicon Valley, there are at least two informal women artists' groups working off nonconformist platforms. For Fierce Words Tender, a poetry/performance art gathering, opening a wedge in Silicon Valley for women's artistic voices is a higher calling, and one that cannot be easily molded to the institutional disciplines of being, as the founder describes it, this or that kind of "nonprofit arts conveyance." To hear Fierce convener Miriam Sachs Martin tell it, there is an almost unpleasant urgency in their work: "There is a real expectation out there that a women's open mic is going to be about the joys of giving birth and flowers, and then women come in and they use \$#&+ and %%#&%, all the same words that men may use in their poems—and people get offended... There are a lot of things where there's a *de facto*: 'scissors' means right-handed scissors, 'culture' means mainstream culture, 'women's open mic' means lesbian poetry...but, in a sense, that is actually exactly what Fierce Words Tender is there for—the person who is not cool—the person who is unique. There is no denying it: for some people we come off like a load of bricks."

In existence for six years, Fierce Words Tender is, in fact, the longest running open mic in San José. The geography of the gatherings carries part of the group's history. We've been kicked out of a lot of places," says Miriam. She takes a light attitude toward what she describes as a cycle of doors that open and close: "I have this joke that we will outlast every coffeehouse in town but Starbucks. Who knows? Maybe we'll outlast Starbucks, too." The mixed public reception does not faze the group, self-described on their website as uncompromisingly committed to "*da most fiercest, feminist, fabulousness*." (Emphasis added.) This is not the typical formalized nonprofit mission statement verbiage. The participatory nature of the gatherings is not left to chance either. If any-

thing about Fierce is explicitly clear, it is the welcome extended to any woman who feels she has something to express. Again, Miriam clarifies, "all *people* are welcomed in the audience; all *self-identified* women are welcomed to take the mic. This is an 'everywoman's mic;' we don't have a sign-up sheet and there are no feature performers. Just come down and take the mic as the spirit moves you. We welcome poetry, music, dance, drama, comedy, song, visual art, audience participation, improv, rhythm, spoken word, short stories, rap, listening, storytelling, and any other kind of art you can think of!" There is something pointedly honest and quasi-therapeutic in these evenings of open mic, and Miriam is apt to extrapolate this subterranean wealth into a democratic arts paradigm: "We hear a lot of awful poetry, but the point has always been healing before art, or at least authenticity... That's why in the open mic I always say, you don't have to be an artist... We've had people read from their journals."

Part of the crafted identity of Fierce Words Tender and other open mic sessions is the indeterminacy of the project. It is a vision that is evolving and adapting to changing circumstances and participants. The idea of charting an organizational path is not appealing if the defined goal or mission of a group is to ebb and flow, and if that fluctuation is seen as necessary and vital for creativity to flourish in the first place. For Miriam, "not having an answer" about the future of Fierce Words Tender is part of the rejection of the systems and structures that, in her opinion, often turn the "arts" into "artifacts." This relaxed position does not mean that groups like Fierce Words Tender are not interested in what Miriam calls "being viable." However, viability is partly defined as preservation of that same ethic of openness and refusal. In this sense, Miriam fears that even within the open mic circuit, there are spaces of creativity that need to be protected against "formulas." For her, poetry open mics are "an art form of the people," yet many of the widely popular poetry slams, which are based on earning points in order to "win," resemble the mainstream values that open mic should contest. She says, "That is what I dislike about slams...and I see people doing it again and again: let me compress my 1,000 kilowatt experience into something that will win." But for Miriam and her "crew," questions of viability also mean finding venues that will continue to allow these kinds of open sessions without censoring the content of the material as "too lesbian, too political, or too raw." In other words, no matter how unconventional, raw, and informal the aesthetic and the gathering, fundamental questions of practical organizational dynamics are always present in these visionary circles.

Another group in Silicon Valley that has attempted to master the duality of aesthetic defiance and organizational development is the hip-hop collective, 5th Element. This group, like Fierce Words Tender, also shares a woman-centered mission, but their work



A member of the hip-hop collective, 5th Element, performs at a local happening.

functions in a different social register. It is decidedly identified with the hip-hop movement and women of color, and often interacts with other independent hip-hop ventures, crews, and happenings locally. They came together simply “just as group of friends, and we are all women, and we all like hip-hop.” The group has grown through a series of house parties where women DJs and MCs take charge. The informal nature of a home as an art space encourages artists who otherwise have pretty much existed “in stealth mode,” as one participant describes. The women of 5th Element, also dislike the competitive nature of male-dominated hip-hop core activities, and the group strives to refute the commonly held notion of what it takes to be an expert DJ or MC. According to Vanessa, one of the group’s founders, “a guy barely touches a turntable and they are already called a DJ, but for a woman to say she is a DJ, she has to be really, really good.” In this case, a group’s mission is articulated in response to a “problem” inherent to a sub-cultural phenomenon, namely the gender dynamics of the local hip-hop scene. In a sense, however, this becomes a specific inner-circle conversation, and one wonders to what extent the formulation of a mission so internal to “da community” at hand runs counter to the pressures to define a greater societal good that is the cornerstone of the nonprofit legal designation. Some informal/participatory practitioners see in this tension precisely the possibility of doing “something

different” by not having to conform their missions, goals, and objectives to external sources, like funding agencies, that constantly require that nonprofit groups “diversify their constituencies.”

These positions of maverick defiance create a new set of questions for community-based arts efforts that have followed the 501(c)(3) nonprofit model. In the present configurations of pluralism in the artworld, it is common to see efforts against the invisibility of ethnic arts traditions in the mainstream culture. It is extremely rare, however, to see ethnic arts interventions defining themselves against the grain of what is considered the core aesthetic elements within the same ethnic or folk tradition the way that the women of 5th Element propose. Informal arts forms such as women’s collectives inside hip-hop circles push these boundaries of “sameness” or essentialized identities of the alternative arts, and as such become interventions limited to a certain small sphere of influence. Is their focus “too narrow” to be of a higher social value? From the point of view of its participants, the answer would be a resolute “no.” Stepping outside a tradition (even if one belongs to the originating folk group) is considered to be very much part of a critical intervention on behalf of more inclusive claims. This can be problematic when, and if, these groups decide to seek external validation and to access support systems. At the same time, it is their focused and inventive programs and ideas within vernacular art forms and cultures that give these groups the social capital required to exist, and that underscores their defiantly participatory and informal approach. Vanessa explains how this ethic ties to the name of the group: “There are four elements to hip-hop: breakdancing, DJ’ing, MC’ing, and graffiti, and we say the fifth element is women, because women have always been part of hip-hop, but they have always been somehow the excluded element.”

Despite their grassroots informality, 5th Element functions with a significant level of planning and expertise. They are an officially recognized student club at San José State University, where many of the members attend school. A professor in the Women’s Studies department serves as their advisor. The group receives funding through the University; last year they received their first grant for \$4,000, enough to make one of the group’s parties a large public event with out-of-town featured women MCs and breakdancers. A core group of seven members meet regularly to plan activities. “People kind of have specialized roles, but not really” says Vanessa. “We don’t elect; we are not that formal...one of the women has done a lot of the managing of the money...she was really responsible, and she always had a notebook with all the receipts, so we said, ‘Hey, you’re going to be our accountant.’” Another woman in the group with experience in graphic design creates all the fliers, and works with the media. The group’s goal is to do four shows a year, and they usually find venues through their own informal

networks. But the women in 5th Element, like other informal cultural agents, are also restless; they are trying to define what else can be done, what new areas can be seized for creative work, what the purpose of a group like this should be, and so forth. Vanessa tells us, “We have changed the face of the gender dynamics in San José’s hip-hop scene, and now we want to do something deeper, like actually work with women in some way other than hip-hop....we are not sure yet.”

The informal arts are entrepreneurial. The Merriam-Webster Dictionary defines an entrepreneur as “one who organizes, manages, and assumes the risks of a business or enterprise.” Risk-taking emerged as a recurrent theme among the informal-artists-turned-cultural agents in Silicon Valley, and generally is associated with three areas: money, time, and reputation. The issue of time management becomes risky insofar as many informal cultural advocates hold full-time jobs, and only do their art or art organizing in their spare time. For some, neglecting their day jobs becomes a real danger. One woman said, “My boss is very nice in allowing me to spend so many of my waking hours concerned about [her own project], but I cannot push it. I have to work and make a living.” In terms of reputation, the risk has to do with the leadership role into which many informal artists are thrust when they decide to convene others and create public events. Although there are benefits of social prestige and admiration by “stepping up” and “making things happen,” the responsibilities associated with these projects can at times be overwhelming. A young poet who organizes open mic events in San José said, “I would love for this thing we do to continue, to be viable... I am very stubborn, and I would probably keep it going for the next 50 years...but I have to be realistic; I need to think about so many other things.”

Many cultural agents work independently and finance their ventures with their own money. Others hope, at a minimum, to recuperate the costs of production of cultural events and gatherings through earned income. Except for occasional small grants from entities that do not require them to have legal nonprofit status such as the Arts Council Silicon Valley, most of the expenses associated with the creation of a public forum for informal artists must be covered by ingenious means: piggybacking on the visibility of an already successful programming network or venue (including those facilitated by successful nonprofit organizations); utilizing email list serves rather than mailers and advertisement as the main publicity channel; securing free publicity by pitching interesting stories to feature reporters; obtaining in-kind donations in the forms of services and goods (from reception appetizers, to printing, to web design and web hosting); and securing buy-in and personal investments from participating artists and close-knit communities of supporters. The defiance used as a rhetorical device to be “independent” from the formalized arts structures is matched by a skilled group of

entrepreneurial cultural agents. It is precisely the mixture of two seemingly opposite ideological strands and social bases that make the study of these alternative participatory producers interesting.

This is more or less how the logic of these cultural happenings flows: someone comes up with a desire or idea to do something new or different (often expressed in the notion that there is a gap in the arts offerings for certain artists and art forms); these proposals are driven by a small group of initiators/visionaries/activists; these activities are not sanctioned by established channels of support; the possibility of realizing the idea of an ongoing collective, a place, or a happening seems large and elusive, and due to their sub-cultural appeal, there is a perception that the odds are stacked against it; this perceived obstacle in and of itself becomes seductive and challenging (not knowing all the right players and policies becomes a thrilling defiance); figuring out how to assemble the necessary and impossible resources to make it happen becomes stimulating and personally fulfilling; things begin to fall into place by sheer determination and gumption; a public moment of fulfillment materializes; a learning curve is accomplished, and expectations for more shared moments of “victory” against the odds begin to grow.

Although these same organizational, life-cycle steps are familiar to many nonprofits and businesses, they are appropriated and cast as an underdog narrative by informal artists and conveners. The narrative fulfills an extremely important part of the viability of the projects, the more it is told, the more it acquires symbolic weight. After a while, however, as already discussed, the rising expectations can lead some artists/conveners to seek more formal institutionalization, and in the process, to wrestle with the potential loss of informality and nonconformity.

In the context described, the entrepreneur holds a special place, but a peculiar inversion of meaning is attributed to this term. He or she is identified as the person who navigates the murky waters of non-officialdom and realizes the “dream” for others to share; but in contrast to business notions that associate the entrepreneur with someone who manages risk prudently in these cultural contexts, the entrepreneur is the person who disregards “management” and follows instinct instead. Being entrepreneurial acquires significance among infor-

Being entrepreneurial acquires significance among informal artists in the same way that being resourceful, clever, doggedly persistent, crafty, inventive, and persuasive is admired in business ventures. But in addition to referencing the skill level of the person involved, it is meaningful as a label of defiance against the prescribed paths of organizational growth and development.

mal artists in the same way that being resourceful, clever, doggedly persistent, crafty, inventive, and persuasive is admired in business ventures. But in addition to referencing the skill level of the person involved, it is meaningful as a label of defiance against the prescribed paths of organizational growth and development. Several of the people interviewed concurred with the view, as expressed by one young man, that “becoming a nonprofit is actually the easy way out.”

One project that is perhaps the quintessential entrepreneurial art venture of San José is Anno Domini. Run by a couple, Cheri Lakey and Brian Eder, owners of Two Fish Design, a graphic design company, the project began in 2000 as a space “where new, emerging, and often ignored art forms could flourish and be celebrated.” When Cheri and Brian refer to “ignored” art forms they are not kidding. Lately they have been producing a series of exhibits and films focused exclusively on the “art of skaters” (as in skate boards). Graffiti artists are a staple at their popular Anno Domini (AD) Gallery, where they host a large public event the first Friday of each month that includes visual arts, drinks, turntable music, and occasional live art happenings. According to one report, the “First Friday” events “make most club nights seem boring.”⁶²

The artistic scope of Anno Domini is adamantly participatory and aesthetically open-ended. According to Cheri, something uniquely and compellingly democratic happens when “skateboarding kids are side-by-side with the suit and tie, or the young professional that works at Cisco.”⁶³ The art presented includes a large range of artists working in unconventional media: tattoos, advertisement manipulations, comic books, urban propaganda, email art, zine-makers, and even irreverent adaptations of folk arts. The Anno Domini Gallery is also one of only three “embassies” for LOMO enthusiasts in the United States. The LOMO is a Russian-made camera that allows photographers to capture a blurred and eerie quality in their images. The premise of the Anno Domini projects is that, as Cheri likes to put it, “there’s got to be more people like us here, working in their cubicles or in their basements, but they just don’t go out because there’s no place for them.’ So we said, ‘Well, they could all come here.’ Even if it’s one night a month, and we get to talk and get together and have a creative community, how cool would that be?” On average, approximately 200 people attend the monthly opening exhibits and parties, which have become the undisputable haven for all “self-producing” artists of Silicon Valley and beyond.

Artistic edge and informal arts missionary zeal are trademarks of Cheri and Brian’s cultural happenings, but so is the unique organizational grid by which they have been able to intervene in the local arts scene, while remaining at a distance. The Anno Domini Gallery is located inside Cheri and Brian’s graphic design studio, which also

serves as their living quarters, which also includes a storefront featuring cards, t-shirts, and posters from each of the shows they have produced. Cheri and Brian subsidize Anno Domini Gallery and all its artistic ventures from the profits generated by their design business. Their basic needs met, they invest almost all their earnings into arts venues such as Anno Domini, which, to be truthful, is also their life. Cheri makes the point clear, and illustrates the price paid for embracing an ambivalent independence: “We are caught in this really weird thing, because we are definitely a do-it-yourself space, and we are definitely a business because we are not a legal nonprofit, but I think we act with an extreme social conscience.... We have always said we wanted to be self-sustaining, but we need to get creative about how we make a living doing what we do, in order to support the freedom we get from not being a nonprofit.”

One of the creative ways Cheri and Brian have found to support their work is to convince others of the value of their vision, especially cities and agencies that hold public spaces in their purse. In San José, they were able to sell their idea for “Phantom Galleries” in empty storefronts to the San Jose Downtown Association and the San Jose Redevelopment Agency. Securing contracts for public art has thereby been one of their tactics of survival. The concept behind Phantom Galleries is simple: artists turn vacant storefront windows into mini-galleries. In a strange twist of circumstances, the Anno Domini team has been able to introduce their blend of non-sanctioned low art forms into the public domain. It is no wonder that one local observer refers to the duo as “small superheroes of the up-and-coming San José art scene.”

The business-like nature of Cheri and Brian’s operation is hardly detectable when one comes in contact with the art and the artists that gather around their site. Their energy is all focused on the work, and especially on the “freshness” of the material as they describe it. Cheri makes clear that the business ventures are a clever plot to gain autonomy in order to promote artists who are unknown or “not even calling themselves artists yet.” Money is an important element of making things happen, but merely in an instrumental sense. Cheri tells us, “It is not about how much we paid for postcards or how much this costs, or that costs... It is about giving people an opportunity to come together around an idea, or around artwork, to just do something... If you are holding an art show in your garage, I’ll come to it... we need more of that.” And “more of that” is what people seem to come searching for at Anno Domini Gallery month after month. At the First Friday event in June 2004, the energy of an underground artworld reverberated, and just as Cheri had insisted, suddenly nothing in this gathering was anything necessarily unusual. After all, she says, “The streets are filled with visionaries.”

Strip Malls and Silk Flowers: Participatory Arts in Commercial Settings

A large Michael's Arts & Crafts store in East San José is the site of a cake decorating class where approximately a dozen women who seem to represent the spectrum of San José's ethnicities and social classes, and ranging in age from early 40s to late 50s, have gathered on a hot July day. It is obvious from their interactions that most of the women know one another. To break the ice, Lisa asks the group if any of them had any prior culinary experience. The women laugh politely at the question, and seem to be amused not only by the self-obviousness of the remark but also by the use of the word "culinary," which seems somewhat contrived for this setting. One of the women says: "The only culinary experience we have, we learned from our Moms in their kitchens." The comment is followed by more laughter.

As the class unfolds, the role of Sally, the Michael's employee and instructor, begins to diminish, slowly turn into supervisor, and eventually to simply "the woman in charge of supplies." This change occurs because most of the women came to the class with their own ideas and experience about cake decorating, and although they sit quietly and listen to instructions attentively, according to Sally, they "tend to do their own thing." The class, which lasts approximately one hour, seems to evolve into a social gathering, more than a formal workshop or class. Seemingly exasperated by the women's lack of compliance with the techniques she is teaching, Sally wonders "why they even sign up and pay to take the class." Yet she also understands that "this small classroom becomes a place of sanctity where the women can escape the monotony of home life." One cannot help but notice the irony of what she is saying: the women want to "escape" home life, yet they congregate in a place where the focus of the activity is to improve domestic skills. Clearly, from their point of view, the gathering fulfills a need to be creative that supersedes the predictability of the activities themselves.

The cake decorating class is one of at least a half-dozen classes offered at the East San José Michael's store every month. For fees as low as \$5 for a 1-hour session, anyone can sign up for classes such as knitting, scrapbook, beading, "Crayola washables and Erase-It markers demo," antique garden ideas, collage shadow boxes, and a "duct tape spring flowers" class for kids. Michael's Arts & Crafts is the nation's largest retailer of arts and crafts materials. With an existing network of 805 stores in 48 states and Canada, Michael's has delivered growth for their investors for seven consecutive years. In 2003, total sales surpassed the \$3 billion mark, and net income increased by 20%.⁶⁴ Owners of a series of smaller retail and wholesale divisions, including the Aaron Brothers frame/poster stores, Michael's describes its niche as "helping crafters of all ages express their imaginations with skill and originality." By offering their customers "a shopping experience that inspires" the pursuit of "creative goals," this retail giant has tapped into a bottomless reservoir of dreams and dollars. Their formula for success cannot be sim-

ply attributed to prices and a "one-stop-shopping" array of products, but more so to the culture of informality, fellowship, popular aesthetic affirmations, and self-empowerment that the company actively promotes through affordable in-store classes, and the deliberate construction of a distinct and particularized "community of crafters."

Translated to the vernacular of community arts, these participatory accomplishments would be the envy of many arts organizations. Stores like Michael's, and in a less direct way, stores like the extraordinary retail phenomenon Target Corporation, have conquered territory that for years other retailers (as well as many arts organizations) never dared to cross: aesthetic value for the masses. The "lack of respect" that discount shoppers had to endure at mass retailing stores in the past (messy bins stuffed with secondary quality items, dirty floors, confusing signage, etc.) has been replaced in these stores by a focus on value linked to democracy in fashion and taste.⁶⁵ Crafting careful corporate policies that militate against everything that makes consumers feel "inferior" everywhere else, commercial "artistic" sites like Michael's—and to some extent Target through its focus on style and simplicity—embrace aesthetic versatility, consumer buy-in, a sense of belonging, and a critique against cultural hierarchy all wrapped up in a sophisticated commercial/communitarian package.

Smaller independent retailers have also sensed a need and a niche, and have responded by creating the unique concept of do-it-yourself art studios. One pioneering model is the Petroglyph store, a small commercial chain founded in the South Bay. Self-described as a "ceramics lounge" where people can decorate ceramic pieces (the store claims to have approximately 100 varieties in stock) and have them fired on-site for a fee, the concept for the store is staunchly participatory. If making art consists of creating a work that one can claim as uniquely personal, then Petroglyph, with its informal social atmosphere, is successful in helping people of all ages to be artists. The irony of this enterprise is that while the store's official description claims that the "world is mass-produced enough," the ceramic bisque objects that the store offers its customers for custom decoration are in themselves mass-produced from molds. The contradiction, far from detracting from the store's mission to help people "bring out their creativity," demonstrates the force that democratic discourses of art making can have among the public.

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Petroglyph, a commercial “ceramics lounge,” hosts artists of all ages.

Like many of the independent informal groups investigated, Petroglyph also avails itself of social critique and progressive politics to underscore their business niche. Co-owner and founder, Jennifer Kurtz, states in the company’s website: “If women ran the world, Petroglyph is what ‘bars’ would have been - adult places to go after work, to get

together with friends, but centered on something constructive. Kid-friendly, but not kid-oriented. Attentive to women’s needs, but not alienating to men.”⁶⁶ Kurtz and her husband Michael Rubin, current residents of Santa Cruz, California and artists themselves, pioneered the concept for this type of creative storefront environment in 1993. According to their own description, “in 1995 there were fewer than six places in the nation dedicated to this activity. By 1999, there were more than 1,200 studios worldwide.”

Imitation might be the best form of flattery: the “art studios for amateurs” concept is catching on, and giving businesses like Petroglyph niche competition. Another chain of do-it-yourself studios started by San José resident Doug Wright under the brand name Artopia, has opened four locations in Silicon Valley since 2002. All four stores are located in suburban neighborhoods; one is located inside the Great Mall in Milpitas, one of the quintessential gathering places for working-class immigrant families in the Valley. Artopia is seeking to expand Petroglyph’s appeal by offering arts activities besides ceramics. In their studios, people can make beaded jewelry, glass bowls, wooden trains, and painted terra cotta pots that are fired in the studio’s kiln. The scope of the business is consistent with the themes elaborated by informal art practitioners everywhere. Doug says, “There are not that many environments you can go into and be close to doing art.”⁶⁷ The perception of a gap between arts organizations as arts *pre-senters* competing against people’s desire to try their hand at art making, is an opportunity for ingenious business ventures by artists-turned-entrepreneurs like Doug.

The success of this idea depends to a large extent on selling the store as a welcoming environment where the pressures to “be the best and the brightest” recede into the background. At Petroglyph, customers appreciate the fact that the store “jump starts the creative process” by displaying a range of choices for the customers. No one seemed to mind the pre-fabricated nature of part of the experience (ceramic molds awaiting color and glaze), because in the end customers obtain what they came for: a personalized art experience. One Petroglyph employee noted that people keep coming back just for the opportunity to “reconnect with that finger-painting, kindergarten-self, and play again.” The environment in which this experience unfolds is non-competitive; there are no rigorous rules for customers. The San José store also has a stage where live music such as jazz, blues, or folk is often performed on weekends. The general social climate for the arts is also very much at the forefront of the marketing strategies of these small businesses. Another Petroglyph employee clearly articulated the perceived gap in arts programming, and the opportunity to serve a constituency: “especially since so many art programs are getting cut out, it’s so nice to hear older people come back to the store and say, ‘oh, I haven’t painted since the third grade.’” Perhaps the greatest strength of Petroglyph is that the store is an enabler of the creative process; they give amateurs something to start with, and it helps people avoid the “creative blocks” that many professional artists confront.

Recognition of the abundance of opportunities for authentic creative expression through the market has been scant. In capitalist economies, we are used to crediting markets for producing and circulating goods and money efficiently, but to the extent that markets are always self-interested players in the public sphere, the role of market forces in the arts has frequently been looked upon with suspicion. The arts, after all, are supposed to “uplift” us from the mundane instrumentality and strategic decisions of daily life. We recognize that the work of exceptionally gifted artists and musicians will be sought out, and the artists may sell their work and talents for substantial amounts of money, but even then, there is something in the trading of art products as commodities that makes the high-brow arts populace squeamish. Of course, artists themselves can be similarly sensitive about commercialism. Ironically, the confounding discourse among artists and publics about the proper balance between commercialism and creativity tends to be resolved for some through formulaic, bland art sold in the form of stock pre-fab poster art sold in the home décor sections of stores like Bed, Bath and Beyond, Pier 1 Imports, and Z Gallerie, among many others.

Based on this kind of logic, the bulk of artistic practices in Silicon Valley and elsewhere tend to be channeled along two seemingly contrarian operations: nonprofit and commercial. These realms of aesthetic expression are frequently considered two ends of a

spectrum—nonprofit jazz organizations teach jazz to kids in the schools and organize community jazz festivals; commercial jazz musicians play concerts, nightclubs, and record CDs for dissemination in jazz-focused, commercial radio stations, and so forth. These spheres interact more frequently than we had previously realized, and they are part of a continuum of expressive activities that feed into each other repeatedly—but ideologies and paradigms are not necessarily made of “facts.” The general perception of two entirely distinct motivations (money versus the love of the arts) fueling commercial and nonprofit ventures overrides discrepancies borne by actual interpenetrations from one realm to another. As a result of this bifurcation, nonprofits for the most part focus on the business of being nonprofits, while “real” businesses worry about bottom lines, and channel any desire they may have to improve “the common good” through grants to nonprofits. This arrangement is one of the purest and most concentrated forms of the American social contract: capital enables community and community supplements capital.⁶⁸ We take pause, however, in recognizing that Silicon Valley may be one of the few places in which this norm may have been modified to the successful advantage of some forms of aesthetic pluralism. Nonetheless, the framework of such ventures into participatory ethics remains problematic, even here, to the extent that it is cemented on ideologies of singular ingenuity and detached from broader questions of cultural, social, and economic equity.

In light of the findings of this study, the peculiar dynamic between economy and aesthetics merits a more thorough examination. In this report we have documented a variety of ways and guises in which commercial or corporate sites might become auspicious enablers of informal and participatory arts. Even radicalized cultural producers and independent artists who direct searing critiques against the commercialization of the arts, describe themselves in entrepreneurial terms as mavericks who craft inventive ways to occupy an intentional position on the margins of the arts establishment. The success of these discourses hinges on a pact of complicity between commercial sites and ideologies, and avid informal artists, consumers, and workers who search for non-judgmental outlets where they can express their individual creativity. Paradoxically, the market appears to these artists more democratic than the alleged nonprofit “third sector” of civil society.⁶⁹ Cynics would say that the market does not frown upon people making monogrammed sweatshirts and calling them art because all that businesses like Michael’s care about are dollars and cents. Critics would say that real art challenges people the same; they do not aim to please the TV-induced aesthetic atrophy that afflicts so much of the so-called general public. But if the only art that appeals to the masses is inevitably “kitsch” then what’s the point of speaking about the value of the arts for society then? Who constitutes the “society” that arts critics so readily invoke?

Nonprofit arts organizations are for the most part, not perceived as interested in upsetting the definition of who’s an artist and who’s not. Therefore, as one amateur actor opined, formal arts organizations are relatively “irrelevant” to the social transactions and conversations that connect people with participatory art-making. They are just not the kinds of places to which people who want to act, sing, play an instrument, dance, or paint gravitate when they are seeking avocational arts experiences. The larger and most visible arts institutions eventually see the wisdom in finding a way to work with some of these grassroots interventions, but only to advance their already firm parameters of participation: to “cultivate more meaningful dialog with younger lovers of art as well as the art collector of tomorrow,” as one press release from the San Jose Museum of Art describes their partnership with PAC.

Say What You Mean: Competing Art Paradigms

Despite plentiful acknowledgments in the regional and national press about Silicon Valley's unprecedented high-tech genius and unique cultural amalgamation, an aura of skepticism about the vitality of the cultural life of the region has lingered among segments of the country's cosmopolitan arts community. And this skepticism has often turned into stigma. Some critics have noted that the art produced in Silicon Valley is fitting to the overall social profile of this region—essentially “suburban” and “safe.”⁷⁰

To dispute the perception of being “under the shadow” of San Francisco's major cultural institutions, and lacking that city's eclectic and cosmopolitan urban ambience, advocates of the arts in Silicon Valley have worked hard for many years to elevate the visibility of the local arts, especially the innovations in certain art genres that have been born and incubated here. Artistic advances worth noticing include digital video and

Rarely is the flow of aesthetic knowledge reversed: that is, from the public's reservoir of vernacular everyday aesthetic knowledge to the artists' interpretation and final product, or to the arts organizations' choices in presentation and programming.

animation, ethnic arts such as Vietnamese painting and Japanese Taiko drumming, desktop publishing, and the presence of some relatively obscure arts organizations that have acquired national reputation for the uniqueness of their focus (for instance, The Academic Film Archive of North America).

Against a backdrop of underestimation, bolstering strategies to document and validate the artistic richness of the region have proceeded along two distinct frames of interpretation. The first one is a *preference for instrumental arguments* that link the arts to

observable *benefits* for society and the economy. In this conceptual frame, the arts are uplifted as one of the key social ingredients (or assets) contributing to the competitive advantage of Silicon Valley in devising new products, services, industries, and technologies, as well as new modes of social relations necessary to sustain a creative cutting-edge ultimately reflected in Wall Street performance. These arguments have emphasized the role that creativity, broadly construed, plays in pioneering a new kind of economy that turns on innovation as well as a range of changes in the built environment, and in social institutions that foster a host of desirable outcomes described as “quality of life” issues.⁷¹ These kinds of connections, often described by local pundits in the words of Harvard Professor Robert Putnam as “social capital,” have captivated the attention of many Silicon Valley arts stakeholders, and have served as the central thrust of the Valley's public spending and philanthropy in the arts.

However, the choice of this discourse to make the arts count in Silicon Valley cannot escape irony. While this line of instrumental arguments about the value of the arts is often lauded by the Silicon Valley's arts community as progressive and ingenious, in

fact the roots of this ideology are neither new nor particularly innovative, but rather conventional and to some extent conservative. As Professor Joli Jensen has shown in her research about the persistent myths of American culture about the arts, this argumentation for the arts' worth echo and reinforce a deep-seated American upper class belief system: namely, the presumption that “the arts are good medicine” for a “sick” society.⁷² The subtext of the same belief system affirms the idea that “good arts” do us good, and “bad arts” (mass culture, for example) do us harm. In essence, it sets up a distinction about art forms that carries through social distinctions about who “has” art and who “needs” art, who appreciates the arts and who needs to be educated in taste and discrimination. In other words, it affirms a hierarchical view of arts choices and sets up a mental frame of reference on how participation ought to flow—i.e., from arts organizations who stage/present “good” arts products to a public in need of these redeeming aesthetic experiences. Rarely is the flow of aesthetic knowledge reversed: that is, from the public's reservoir of vernacular everyday aesthetic knowledge to the artists' interpretation and final product, or to the arts organizations' choices in presentation and programming.

This dominant belief and mode of advocacy on behalf of the arts is such an article of faith among the arts community that in some ways it could be difficult to see how it can come up short. Not only must we recognize that these ideas about the arts' essential benefits for Silicon Valley are part of the core world view of most mainstream arts advocates locally (and hence, like all ideologies, difficult to subject to criticism), but they also form part of a self-fashioned discourse of “good intentions.”⁷³ Since these intentions and these social goals are deemed rational and positively beneficial to all people in Silicon Valley, the structural arrangements through which arts are produced and presented to the public are similarly granted the same logical validity. In other words, the institutional forms of mainstream arts organizations are conceived and organized to reflect particular understandings of art, its production, and its consumption by the public. Within these ideologies, arts advocates design ambitious and expensive projects to promote “audience development,” to market the arts better, and in some cases, to “celebrate the arts” as a matter of organic common-sense: in the same way that smoking is bad for your health, the arts are good for your soul, if you get the “right kind” of art in the “right dose.”

Even in an era of pluralism in arts practice, when particular attention is paid to community input and community buy-in, the core belief in the

Even in an era of pluralism in arts practice, when particular attention is paid to community input and community buy-in, the core belief in the artist as sender and the public as receiver remains solidly in place.

artist as sender and the public as receiver remains solidly in place. Under this dominant framework, prioritizing widespread public participation as *the source* for the creation of new work would, in effect, alter the very definition of what an “arts organization” is supposed to do, and the responsibilities that they are assumed to have vis-à-vis “real” artists. In reproducing itself as a logical and effective discourse to advocate for the arts, this approach elides the possibility that there may be competing viewpoints that may in fact establish a different relationship between the arts, artists, and the people of Silicon Valley. Once a horizon of possibilities is set by convention, it is difficult to imagine how things might be different under other kinds of institutional arrangements. The dynamics that come to light through the study of informal/participatory arts practices, however, are *all about* such imagining and inventiveness—they can be considered radical to the extent that they turn what is obvious on its head and hold implications for the re-ordering of the mandate of arts programming.

Questioning the fundamental premises of art-making and the relationship between art and its public as it has existed up to now in the form of an implicit set of assumptions, is an exercise in enumerating the conditions that may have caused the loss of certain publics, as well as the opportunities to gain other publics. The fact is that in today’s economy and social landscape, there is no longer one single “public” for the arts to cultivate and capture. To the extent that we can believe that it is possible to follow a different logic for the value of the arts premised on a different philosophical tradition, one that would argue, as Professor Jensen has stated, that “the arts aren’t good *for* us,” but that they simply *are* us, widely varying aesthetic expressions that are meaningful and pleasurable in various forms for various social groups⁷⁴, these arguments become counter-intuitive to what most of us know to be true about arts programs and organizations.

Reflecting on the dynamics of a bifurcated system of cultural values, former NEA Chairman Bill Ivey has said:

It is problematic to be in the position of asserting a moral claim for art in relation to the public and philanthropic wallet when we’re almost always only talking on behalf of the kind of art we happen to think is best. After all, Americans are deeply engaged in art, but it’s North African hip-hop on satellite radio, vintage jazz on an iPod, a cool new suit, a CD from Starbucks, the hot new band at the local pub, some nice looking dishes from Pottery Barn, a Saturday afternoon rehearsal of an amateur bluegrass band, and an argument at the water cooler about the relative virtues of “Sideways” and “Million Dollar Baby.” Sure, sometimes it’s a night at the nonprofit theater or a muse-

um visit, but those engagements with our nonprofit world are not where most Americans, most of the time, make or consume art. Too often, our case making suggests sternly that all these everyday creative connections are not real art, or real art engagement. We want money and attention directed at our sense of what is important in the spectrum of art making, and we often come off like missionaries trying to convert the unwashed even as we try to get them to help pay our bills. America’s cultural mainstream is profoundly vernacular, so changing our approach means rethinking basic assumptions about value and artistic hierarchies—another daunting challenge, but if we are going to connect art and art making with quality of life in order establish sufficient agreement on value to support our case, we’ve got to derive meaning from the way citizens really engage in art every day. That’s where art connects with quality of life and the public interest.⁷⁵

In a recent review of participatory arts practices in three neighborhood-based arts centers in Maine, Minnesota, and Washington, cultural critic Tom Borrup describes how this “other” view of the role of the arts in community can be manifested not simply as semantics or utopia, but as concrete institutional practices. I quote him at length to convey the full context of his remarks. According to Borrup:

The term cultural democracy describes practices in which culture and artistic expression are generated, interpreted, controlled and exchanged on an equitable basis by individuals and communities rather than by institutions of central power. Most nonprofit cultural organizations are fashioned, out of habit and expediency, around institutional models that are dependent on multi-sector funding and the need to behave in ways to which boards, staffs, artists, audiences and funders are accustomed. But some are breaking new ground in how they engage a diverse mix of people in determining both the form and content of cultural programs and activities....few cultural organizations have developed institutional programming practices that attempt to further cultural democracy and reach outside the bounds of arts professionals and into their communities. Sure, surveying audiences and truly listening to advisory committees are gestures in that direction. However, the question is, how far can the principles of cultural democracy be interwoven into the administration and delivery of cultural programs? And would such practices be applicable to other, especially larger, cultural institutions? As asset-based community organizations, [organizations that work along these principles] begin with the assumption that their communities are rich rather than deficient in culture, creativity and histories. They work to mine and empower these indigenous assets, as opposed to seeing their role as importers of art, culture and history.⁷⁶

An alternative view of the arts has had two marked periods of strength and vigor in public policy in the United States: the Work Progress Administration's (WPA) cultural projects during the New Deal in the 1930s, and the Comprehensive Employment and Training Act (CETA) program during the 1970s. In both instances, widespread participatory arts were centrally linked to occupational arts (including the employment of many professional artists), but neither program developed from or articulated smoothly with strictly "arts policy" or "arts advocacy" communities, which were, for the most part, active in a different realm of public discourse—one that would lead to the creation and eventual expansion of the National Endowment for the Arts under the very revealing slogan "the best for the most."⁷⁷

The expressive/pragmatic approach to the arts succeeded only in a limited sense and for a short time. Traces of its ideology and ethic survived through some NEA programs and in the current arts environment through some forms of "diversity" programming, but even these forms of expansion and multicultural awareness have been predominantly filtered through the dominant arts paradigm that is essentially unsympathetic to "low arts" and amateur art-making. The existence of this counter-ideology to the arts paradigm is sometimes acknowledged in discussions about the value of the arts, but never brought to bear enough to reorient the thrust of the conversation and strategies.

A second, corollary frame of interpretation follows and supplements the instrumental argument for the arts used for advocacy purposes by the Silicon Valley formalized arts community. This frame *emphasizes the role of official arts practices and systems* over "unofficial" arts experiences and interventions. In other words, it creates and validates the existence of a binary system of art-making and art-enjoyment: arts practices that are readily recognizable as art and other activities that, albeit creative, are marginally artistic. Similarly, the binary separates people who implicitly understand the value of the arts (i.e., support, subscribe, attend arts events and organizations) from a "non-arts" population generally considered "to be a bit of a blank slate; a body of people who would most likely love art if only they had access to, and education in, the arts... a passive body of people who [need] motivation."⁷⁸ Binaries produce effects of polarization that construct the existence of one realm of activity at the expense of another.

The unofficial nature of the arts labeled "informal" in this study cannot be omitted. Unofficial also means suspect and non-sanctioned (for example the difference in status and prestige between "knitting" and "textile art"). As is often the case, the *invisibility* of these forms within the dominant discourse are paradoxically belied by their overwhelming *visibility* in everyday life. The study of the informal arts necessarily implies a questioning of social hierarchies and the promotion of certain modes of cultural

"infraction." By focusing on aesthetic experiences in non-art places where people harness creativity to do forms of art that lead them to consider themselves in some way an artist, the informal arts implicitly question the rationality of the organizational model that stresses art as a product delivered by professionals to be consumed and appreciated by non-creators. As Marie Acosta, Director of the California Latino Arts Network, interjected on a recent online conversation sponsored by Arts Journal about "the case for the arts," these issues are as fundamental as they are elusive. Her statements summarize many of the key points worth pondering in relation to the role of the participatory arts within a larger "art system:"

The recent discussion of how to increase public value for the arts is motivated by a monumental challenge our administrators and boards face on a daily basis. How do we earn more money to pay our bills? That's the wrong motivation. We cannot argue that the public has little appreciation for the arts when art is part of everyone's lives, some more than others. By assuming that there is little apprehension for the arts because the public is not buying tickets to the opera, symphony, or ballet is wrong-minded. Perhaps we need to look at why these art forms are appreciated by a thin sliver of the public, and looked upon as elitist by a wider margin. As well, we should explore why traditional art or art reflective of a specific group experience are often undervalued in discussions about art...Perhaps shifting the discussion might bring about a deeper discussion about who is defining art, and from whose voice do they speak.⁷⁹

The pervasive effects of high/low thinking in the arts, and the flavor that such unnamed frames add to educational/advocacy efforts on behalf of the arts is manifest in how the arts community rhetorically constructs the discourse of the arts' "troubles." For instance, many members of the incorporated nonprofit arts community worry that not enough people are interested in the arts. This worry is often expressed in the form of a problem that never goes away. For many arts advocates, to the extent that the general public fails to grasp the relevance, importance, and benefits to society of the arts, the harder it becomes to convince public officials to fund the arts adequately. To address this troubling binary of "us" ("people in the know") versus "them" (the non-artistically engaged), the arts community has advanced two major fields of action: advocacy, and audience development or outreach.⁸⁰

Research on the perception of the art "problem" among informal arts practitioners pokes holes in the foundation of audience development efforts. The *Creative Community Index*, research conducted by Cultural Initiatives Silicon Valley in 2001 through personal interviews in three different languages with over 350 Silicon Valley

residents, yielded provocative insights into people's behavior and beliefs regarding the arts and their relationship to cultural participation.⁸¹ Perhaps the most revealing and puzzling finding was that when asked, "Do you consider yourself to be an artist in any way?" 51% of Silicon Valley residents said "Yes." Of the 49% of respondents who had not identified themselves as artists, 38% said they do have a hobby or a work activity that allows them to be creative. Ninety-two percent of respondents were able to describe some form of participatory arts activity of which they were a part, with marked variations across ethnic groups regarding the kinds of activities most favored.

Another interesting vector in the research questions reinforced the gap of perception and experience described throughout this study: only 23% of the performances attended by people interviewed for the *Index* were in facilities expressly designed as art venues (concert halls, theaters, etc), whereas 77% were in "multi-purpose" facilities such as gyms, auditoriums, parks, or places of worship. While one in four respondents said they would like to learn to play a musical instrument, others saw their connection to creativity through such non-conventional art forms as "carpentry, cooking, sewing, 'making and modifying motorcycles,' or 'being a DJ.'"

These findings from the 2001 *Creative Community Index* suggest a loud dissonance between what art-people and non-art people think about the arts, and their ideas about what should count as participation. For many among the general public, interest in the arts is ample, but opportunities to express it are few. When asked to rate their community in terms of being a "poor" or "excellent" place to pursue their artistic interests, only about half of those interviewed gave Silicon Valley a good rating. What to make of this odd finding in a place where creativity, innovation and cultural infrastructure are foundational principles among stakeholders? This response is even more puzzling when we consider that the *Creative Community Index* study was able to create a database containing 857 organizations engaged in providing arts services of some kind in Silicon Valley. Something other than lack of sufficient cultural networks and art infrastructures must be having an effect on the public perception as evidenced from results that indicate that Silicon Valley is not such a great place to pursue artistic involvement. My sense is that the arts community itself may have contributed, albeit unwittingly, to the widening of this gap as a result of certain rhetorical and organizational strategies to define and address "the problem" of participation.

The non-arts public has elaborated discourses of their own that respond to information about the nonprofit world that circulate in the public sphere. More specifically, those who are allegedly not interested in the arts have picked up the familiar narrative about an artworld always struggling to connect with people. In contrast, this has

resulted in a public dialogue that tends to take shape around a generalized sensibility based on the public's position as non-experts and outsiders. These self-assigned characteristics are part of the same discursive cloth that is continuously reinforced by the art-speak of "reaching," "educating," "developing," and "cultivating" audiences and public support. If we take seriously the counter-intuitive proposal that the public is more interested in the arts than arts organizations have so far noticed, then we must also consider the possibility that many of the audience development efforts that have been up to now considered best practices among nonprofit arts organizations, may have started off from misconstrued premises.

The arguments for tactical programs to educate the public on the value of the arts are plentiful. Dozens of studies have been published throughout the last thirty years that prove that arts activities yield measurable benefits in almost all realms of social life—health, the look and design of neighborhoods, capacity for racial tolerance, the emotional and cognitive development of children, productivity at work, global capitalist competitiveness, as a revenue source for impoverished communities, and just about any other kind of desirable social goal we can imagine.⁸² Furthermore, the general thrust of the case for the arts hinges on the idea that if more audiences were "developed" and if artists and arts organizations could learn better marketing techniques, both would have an easier time at being solvent or proving their worth to donors and contributors.

On a pragmatic level there is nothing inherently wrong with these approaches. Evidence shows that these arguments have been effective in increasing arts funding, or sometimes saving it from extinction, and in motivating more awareness about the arts in general. But something does not make sense in the current set-up of this dichotomy: if the value of creativity is such a universal truth, and is so deeply embedded in all sorts of human activities, why is participation in the arts, and the health of the arts sector that allegedly should follow from such an animated constituency always such a hard sell to the public, and the subject of endless symposia, summits, conferences, panels, and essays among arts advocates?⁸³

If we take seriously the counter-intuitive proposal that the public is more interested in the arts than arts organizations have so far noticed, then we must also consider the possibility that many of the audience development efforts that have been up to now considered best practices among nonprofit arts organizations, may have started off from misconstrued premises.

Our research among Silicon Valley informal artists revealed that many people hold the perception that art-making is not the primary interest of arts organizations. Running an arts organization, as a matter of operational self-interest, seems to many people to be the main “cause” pursued by arts advocates. Right or not, this is a perception that cannot be ignored.

Perhaps the answer to this question can be found, at least partially, in a remark that anthropologist Clifford Geertz made some years ago: not all talk about the arts is the same. Some talk about the arts confines the conversation to the inner rules of the game as defined by its own vested players (self-fulfilling and circular in nature), while other talk about the arts does not seem to be about the arts at all, but “about something else—everyday life, myths, trade, or whatever.”⁸⁴ These seemingly incompatible relationships to the subject of the arts, established from varied social positions, are active in our communities, and they form an invisible barrier for participation. Our research among Silicon Valley informal artists revealed that many people hold the

perception that art-making is not the primary interest of arts organizations. Running an arts organization, as a matter of operational self-interest, seems to many people to be the main “cause” pursued by arts advocates. Right or not, this is a perception that cannot be ignored.

In contrast to the deficit model that dominates art-thinking in arts circles, when it comes time to identify the prevalence of arts participation, the general public does not tend to perceive itself in need of education and convincing of the value of the arts. The problem lies instead with the fact that people don't want to be merely an audience, or worse yet, that they may be somewhat hostile or negatively predisposed to the efforts to be turned into such. Because pleas for engagement from the nonprofit arts sectors are perceived by the public as self-serving, the dissonance between the perception of art-making among the people interviewed in this study and the conventional wisdom of artspeak among arts advocates cannot be bridged simply by doing better outreach. Instead, bridging the gap will require taking on, directly and critically, the differential judgments over what “counts” as art that drives the wedge of participation in the first place. This is, so to speak, the “elephant in the room” of the artworld that inquiries into the informal arts can be especially adept at teasing out, and placing on the agenda locally and nationally.

As Nick Rabkin of the Chicago Center for Arts Policy has observed, most artspeak within the arts community “has focused on audience consumption of art produced by professionals and presented by cultural institutions.”⁸⁵ A different sense of art experience seems to interest people more: those in which “regular folks” can engage in cre-

ative practices (broadly cultural and not simply “artistic”) in less institutional settings. This situation presents, no doubt, a serious dilemma for arts administrators. Like it or not, in the United States the nonprofit sector—enlightened and democratic, or austere and elitist—represents a large part of public access to the arts. In contrast to other countries, arts and culture are not, for the most part, seen as the responsibility of the government. Being the designated sector for arts opportunities in society, arts organizations need support, and need to plea for their existence. Yet the question at hand is: how can this pleading resonate more with what people in general desire and want from the arts, versus what arts experts think people need?

For some arts advocates, talk of this sort will raise the red flag of a misguided populism that threatens the very character of art as we know it. Since the 16th century, the arts have been regarded as a realm of activity *separate* and *better* than the dross of ordinary life. In one sense, these fears would not be unfounded as the proposal for a more inclusive and radically participatory arts paradigm, in effect, challenges two foundational tenets of the artworld: (1) the belief in the artist as genius, and (2) the notion of art as a sublime and transcendental experience. What is most interesting about the public's expressed desire for a more accessible and participatory arts system, however, is that both this study and the Chicago study yield data that suggest that this radically democratic impulse to “desacrilize”⁸⁶ the arts and foster more opportunities to participate in the arts, instead of simply appreciating the arts, is not in any way perceived by the public in opposition to, or at the expense of professional artists and arts organizations.

For the most part, the informal artists interviewed for this study were great admirers of both the accomplished skills of professional artists, as well as the wherewithal of arts organizations to exist and create programs. Furthermore, many consider the idea of becoming 501(c)(3)s. Many equate the process of nonprofit incorporation with the possibility of becoming more “stable” and receiving funding for their work, even while they are confounded about why arts organizations, as one person told us, are “always complaining” that they don't have *enough* money, space, or staff—when unincorporated groups often have none of these things, and still manage to create art. Other informal artists explicitly reject the 501(c)(3) nonprofit model because they perceive it as constraining, particularly to those forms of art-making that are more entrepreneurial like hip-hop (i.e., performing in nightclubs or bars, or selling their artwork, or getting paid to travel to other hip-hop events).

The preceding arguments are not intended to suggest that what the public wants is always transparent and generative, and that “the masses” constitute a romantic reservoir of genuine creativity—in all places and circumstances. Alienating elements of

today's cultural conjuncture cannot and must not be suppressed based solely on a superficial gesture towards egalitarian pluralism. The fact remains that the nuances of what the public means by and wants in participatory arts require a finer grain analysis than the data the arts community has collected until recently. But what is known, is that when the mainstream arts community speaks of problems and decline in the arts, they really mean the arts that they (the established arts insiders) know, and the forms of artistic engagement that they mostly validate—not all the arts and not all forms of artistic expression. Therein resides the crux of the polemics that every couple of years galvanizes the arts community to ponder the question of arts participation: when it comes to defining the problem, not everyone speaks the same language, or has the same criteria of definition. Without a dissenting gravitational pole in the conversation, or a painstakingly deliberate effort to turn the key assumptions upside down, much of what is discussed as a problem can rarely escape the circular logic of its own presuppositions. My argument here is that the study of the informal arts offers such an alternative and critically productive vantage point.

The research presented here points to a series of debatable arguments that pivot on our understanding and willingness to tackle questions of social distinction. This may be especially difficult to discuss and grasp in a community predominantly marked by tolerance and cross-ethnic, cross-class harmony such as Silicon Valley. However, it is important to stress that, in the final analysis, a deeper understanding of the role of the informal arts in the cultural life of Silicon Valley, and the policy recommendations that may be crafted based on that understanding, will depend on the extent to which the concrete findings of this report are displaced onto a broader context of social and aesthetic “inversions” from the taken-for-granted ways in which, for the most part, the arts community in this region has defined its role in arts promotion and outreach.⁸⁷

How does one question the prevailing hierarchical contexts that in turn impede pragmatic, operational opportunities for supporting forms of participatory arts? One possible small step is to direct our attention precisely to those points of intersections in which two seemingly opposing systems of meaning converge: experiences of art-making and art-doing in unusual institutional settings, or through unusual art production approaches. The most significant initiatives that can be undertaken to support the participatory arts without altering their fundamental informal character, may in fact have something to do with supporting those nodes of cultural production in the non-profit infrastructure where professional and amateur arts overlap, and can fruitfully cross-pollinate to strengthen each other.

Not all nonprofit arts systems, organizations, and environments will lend themselves well to this kind of ideological and operational realignment. Yet, effective responses to this challenge may be closer at hand than we think: opera companies can consider the inclusion of amateur singers in their choruses; chamber orchestras can adapt traditional folk music elements, and create multi-layered teaching sessions where the public “helps” the musicians play other than classical instruments; museums can set aside gallery space for amateur photographers and watercolorists; ethnic arts organizations can interact with seniors at daycare facilities or organize community gatherings utilizing the arts passed on through person-to-person transmission; community-based arts organizations can hold grassroots theatre workshops for amateur actors, or organize working mothers in an urban neighborhood to learn silkscreening.⁸⁸ Thus, the broader the interpretation of the frames and traditions that are at stake in each one of the art norms invoked, and then considered broken with each new infraction, the better able we'll be to identify priorities and tactical interventions with a higher potential of success.

Conspiracy of the Willing: Conclusions and Recommendations

As a total cultural system, the arts field is complicated; no one can account for the totality of creative endeavors undertaken by individuals and groups all the time and everywhere. But while this is true, it is also equally certain that the exigencies of the nonprofit arts system have, up to now, had very little room or interest in accounting for the informal/participatory arts as a relevant measure of an organization's overall community impact. Measures in terms of attendance, memberships, fundraising goals, and number of programs have been more prominently recorded and discussed by arts panels than the depth and commitment of organizations for engaging in grassroots participatory art-making.

Although some scholars and activists have been critical of the elitist nature of some nonprofits, and others have clamored that the sector is insufficiently responsive to social needs, in essence, all critics agree on one point: nonprofits have peculiar nonprofit-type issues and problems, and only nonprofit-tailored solutions can adequately address these challenges. The same logic is thus applied to the problem of arts participation: more marketing will lead to more ticket buyers who will sit in their seats and applaud the great art brought to them. The choices for saving an ailing symphony orchestra rarely ever include, as one fervent arts advocate proposed, creating a massive participatory effort in which people respond to, play, learn, dissect, critique, reinvent, and take apart a classic work such as Beethoven's Fifth Symphony and then, maybe, wish to come to the concert hall as ticket buyers.⁸⁹ To the extent that the arts are implicitly and explicitly conceived and structured only as the enterprise of the cultural sector and not, as former NEA Chairman Bill Ivey has argued, as a total "arts system" with implications for creative expression located in nodes of social/political/and economic life as diverse as the copyright law code, Michael's stores, HBO, the licensing of radio stations, and employee groups at Hewlett-Packard, then art-speak will only be self-referential and, ostensibly, of little interest to anyone else but "arts" people. Upon leaving his position as NEA Chair during the Clinton administration, Ivey has described an expanding new frontier of cultural and creative work in the world today, and that by concentrating narrowly only on cultural nonprofit groups "and the agencies and nongovernmental groups that help them," we might be overlooking the policy interventions that are "*really* shifting our cultural landscape" such as copyright laws, international trade agreements, etc.⁹⁰

In this work, I have identified and documented the existence of an alternative track of cultural production in Silicon Valley that contradicts much of the prevailing logic that dictates what constitutes "nonprofit-type" or "commercial-type" concerns in arts participation. Also, I have documented multiple independent and informal cultural gatherings that borrow from commercial and nonprofit structures freely, yet refuse to be

simply cast as pure forms of either "commercialism" or nonprofit "careerism." The fortitude of this alternative social field has been known only dimly to most arts policy makers until recently. The research undertaken conjures up an image of a world of informal arts in Silicon Valley that is expansive, resilient, adaptive, and to the extent that independent, unsanctioned "artists" can muster the know-how to breach institutional barriers such as money, space, and specialized knowledge, then also thoroughly entrepreneurial. The intellectual and even spiritual force that many informal cultural agents attribute to the acts of "stepping up" and "stepping in" to craft new spaces and cultural happenings in Silicon Valley emerge as signs of optimism in the current configuration of the public sphere. For many people, "stepping in" means seizing opportunities in those gaps where the arts establishment goes begging. By fulfilling goals of self-realization, mutual aid, and symbolic community, entities as diverse as Espresso Garden, 5th Element, the Aztec dance circle Tezkatlipoka, the Milpitas community gallery, Petroglyph ceramics stores, and the craigslist online community infuse the cultural landscape of Silicon Valley with fresh democratic idealism.

But "stepping up" also implies, at least in a majority of the cases examined, financing one's own dreams. This kind of arrangement can produce significant anxiety among artists who find themselves outside the networks and circles of experts and insiders in the arts community locally. It can also make informal/participatory arts happenings highly vulnerable to problems of continuity, leadership, consistency, visibility, and in some cases, accountability. For this reason, acquiring nonprofit legal status looms large in the horizon of many independent cultural agents as a path to stability and legitimacy. While some informal practitioners reject the 501(c)(3) nonprofit model outright, most projects examined here navigate the waters of the nonprofit ideology and organizational format in one way or another.

The hip-hop collective 5th Element, for instance, found itself a financial sponsor through the San José State University and designated one of its members as treasurer. Anno Domini Gallery nurtures itself from contracts for public art programming that its founders obtain by virtue of being active—albeit independent—arts promoters locally. Even commercial entities such as Michael's Arts & Crafts, Knitting Arts, and

The field of cultural production on the margins of the arts establishment is not as "marginal" as one would assume. More accurately, one can say that the informal arts in Silicon Valley are a complex interweaving of institutional locations and infrastructural interdependence that mixes and matches commercial, nonprofit, and independent registers of social life non-restrictively.

Espresso Garden incorporate the language of nonprofit community-building and mission-driven programming structures to cement their niches. These are not to be read as vacuous appropriations of community values, but as actual reflections of the communitarian environments that these types of locales foster. The field of cultural production on the margins of the arts establishment is not as “marginal” as one would assume. More accurately, one can say that the informal arts in Silicon Valley are a complex interweaving of institutional locations and infrastructural interdependence that mixes and matches commercial, nonprofit, and independent registers of social life non-restrictively. In tandem with the promise and resilience that this informal sector of art making exhibits, however, this field is not as secure, and expansively radical as one might presume at first glance. The same compromises, accommodations, frustrations, and infrastructural needs that frame the operational cultures of nonprofit arts groups reappear in more or less the same areas in the informal arts entities that leap towards social visibility.

The promise that the informal/participatory arts represent an alternative conceptualization of art and culture in our world, however, cannot be discounted. As such, the challenge that such proposals posit to the artworld as we-know-it must be engaged seriously and critically. The enthusiasm for what these re-inscriptions of the cultural landscape can do for society as a whole has led some social commentators to recommend community arts as the repositories for the revitalization of civil society.⁹¹ During the last two decades, many scholars have focused attention on a perceived problem within civil society—namely the fear that it is receding, and in its place states and markets make frontal advances on people’s lifestyles.⁹² There was no clear consensus, however, among the people interviewed in Silicon Valley about whether the socially-organized forms of participatory arts, for all their energy and democratic impetus, can serve as harbingers of hope for the arts in general and even less for an abstract entity called “society.” The goals of informal arts practitioners seemed to us to be more modest and concrete—create spaces, make things happen, let people’s imagination loose, craft meaning out of untenable circumstances, upset the intellectual distinctions, foster pleasure and beauty in all forms, and maybe through some serendipitous way accomplish “something” that transforms some small corner of the social order. In this sense, as Peter Dobkin Hall has observed, the function of these types of projects (much like the function of scholarly studies such as this one) can be described as an “exercise of the moral imagination,” but nothing more. This is not to say that they are not important, or fundamentally critical in a larger sense, but it is to say that they are limited.

Perhaps we need to consider the possibility that the emphasis on civic participation as a general thrust of the discussion on the value of the arts is the result of anxieties in larger arenas of social and economic life that the arts are in no position to supersede. The desire of arts advocates to make the arts matter for a greater social good always seems to be met on the ground by contradictions that cannot be resolved by shouting louder and more clever cheers. As one reluctant arts administrator in Silicon Valley told us, “If you open your eyes and see all the many ways in which people get involved in artistic things or bring art into their lives, you can conclude that the arts in Silicon Valley are alive and kicking, thank you very much; but on the other hand, if you consider that many young artists eventually leave the Valley or that art institutions are always drawing a blank on how to pull people in, or that really cool cultural places and ideas in the Valley appear for a little while and then disappear as quickly as they came, then the fact that people practice the piano or the guitar at home or at a coffeehouse, or join a book club, or whatever, is a sad commentary about what is happening in this so-called great place of innovation.”

Given the disparate nature of the phenomenon we have studied, is there any sense then in crafting an initiative that would support the informal/participatory arts, and hopefully insert their fresh critical insights into the current cultural landscape of the Valley? Yes. I believe there is practical and intellectual sense in such a project. But I also believe that such a project might be already underway. The problem is that, in spite of all of the attention paid to arts participation and audience development in arts policy circles locally, the grassroots cultural interventions that are pushing the envelope in this arena of civil society and thus reinventing art and cultural practice in Silicon Valley are hidden from view. The dynamics that render the most visible invisible are fundamentally related to questions of power, hierarchy, and ideological authority that shroud the artworld in circular soul-searching.

The best policy initiative in the direction of more participatory arts in Silicon Valley should start by making visible the programs and organic social and intellectual positions that are churning these debates in the region currently. This study has attempted to be a step in that direction. Beyond visibility, a strategic policy initiative directed at the juncture at which profit, nonprofit, and independent organizations *already* interact to “break the mold” of staid arts outreach programs and arts ideologies is a good place to start. I believe there are a few specific nodules of cultural activity in Silicon Valley today that are ready for such an intervention.

For example, I was surprised by the response received from a survey to 80 arts organizations that receive funding through the City of San José’s Office of Cultural Affairs.

The response rate itself was approximately 25%, and the range of arts organizations represented in the responses and the kinds of interactions so many of them disclosed as having with the informal arts was not unexpected. Even those who said they had no existing relationships with the participatory forms of arts were interested in a conversation about the topic; this interest came as much from formal and traditional arts organizations such as Opera San José and Ballet San Jose Silicon Valley, as from very small ethnic groups such as Mariachi San José. I take the motivation of these respondents to answer the survey as a sign of their interest in locating their practices within this broader inquiry on participation. The survey asked three simple questions: (1) does your organization have regular contact or intersects with any type of informal arts activities; (2) do you offer any other kind of support to informal art activities; and (3) do you have knowledge of any other informal arts activities that take place in your community?

The responses to these questions yielded information about a tightly woven cloth of informal art activities taking place *within* the nonprofit field locally. For instance, the South Bay Guitar Society holds monthly open mics that encourage amateur guitar players to perform, and they sponsor lecture/recitals that end with an “open stage” segment where participants can bring their guitars and learn new styles as part of the organization’s formal program. Similarly, the San Jose Jazz Society runs a jazz jam session every Wednesday night that encourages “all level of instrumental and vocal amateur jazz performers of all ages to come and play along with professional jazz musicians.” The Jazz Society charges \$5 at the door for these sessions, but that barely covers the time of the professional musicians, which are compensated by the Jazz Society out of their regular operating funds. Interestingly, the Jazz Society also works actively with amateur photographers who have expressed an interest in documenting the organization’s concerts and jams. The Society supports and encourages these visual artists by paying for their film and materials.

Some of the nonprofit arts groups define their involvement in the informal arts in terms of educational activities in schools, or with families in communities and neighborhood settings. Among these, San Jose Taiko has a long history of “incubating” participatory arts activities initiated by other groups in the Asian American community by providing rehearsal and meeting space in their facility, offering technical assistance, lending instruments for special events, and assisting with fundraising. In addition, throughout the years they have maintained a close relationship with informal arts clubs that meet at the San Jose Buddhist Church Betsuin, and that promote participatory arts activities such as flower arranging, Japanese folk singing and storytelling, Japanese doll making, bonsai tree growing, and Japanese dance classes. The Mexican Heritage

Corporation offers free meeting space to several inter-generational amateur performing groups, including Peruvian, Chinese and indigenous Mexican communities. The Children’s Discovery Museum offers a regular set of programs through which parents and children can create art in a variety of disciplines. They also host bi-monthly family events called “Lunadas” (the meeting takes place on the day of the full moon each month; “luna” is moon in Spanish) in which many informal arts performers get to participate alongside professional artists.

Two groups mentioned that they were in the process of creating informal art happenings for interested amateur artists: the Bay Area Glass Institute (BAGI) and the Association for Viet Arts. The Latino arts space, MACLA, was in the process of undertaking a community development project in their own neighborhood through which immigrant women would learn silkscreening, and mobilize neighborhood and economic development projects. Several respondents said that although their involvement with the informal arts was minimal they knew of other arts organizations that devoted time and space to this vision; honorable mentions included Children’s Musical Theatre San Jose, WORKS Gallery, Silicon Valley Slam, City Lights Theatre, T  atro Vision, and the Community School of Music and Arts. Reflecting the openness that we found among all the survey respondents, Dennis Nahat, Artistic Director for Ballet San Jose Silicon Valley, said “We are open to new ideas from all corners of our community.”

When this inventory of activities is placed against the gaps in opportunities for art-making that many informal artists and informal arts advocates perceive in Silicon Valley, I cannot help but notice the fracture that runs through the Valley’s self-identified “cultural community.”

One interesting exception to the rule has been the Community Arts Fund program operated by Arts Council Silicon Valley. For more than 15 years, the Arts Council has consistently set aside funds to support “non-professional, volunteer activities.” In 2003, the program funded 58 such groups with a total grants allocation of \$110,523. Groups funded in this category mostly consist of avocational artists working primarily in direct, hands-on, participatory settings. Groups are not required to be incorporated nonprofit entities to apply or receive funds. Grants are awarded for project-related expenses, and although they seem small in the context of Silicon Valley grant ranges, they are grants so targeted and focused that they go a long way towards maximizing impact. The groups funded comprise one of the most comprehensive rosters available of amateur, avocational, folk, and informal arts practitioners in the Valley. They include several non-arts spaces and sites as well, such as the African American Community Service Agency, African Refugee Community Services, New Bridges to

Jewish Community, and the United Nations Association. In addition, grantees represent the wide range of activities that due to their idiosyncratic nature function in small units of meaning and fellowship. Grantees include the International Russian Music Piano Competition, Peninsula Clef Hangers, Rainbow Women's Chorus, San Jose Metropolitan Band, and Santa Clara Chorale.

It is clear from this density of artistic engagements and interests that opportunities for even more bold, inventive, and visionary connections between these grantees, the established nonprofits that responded to our survey, and the 17 independent cultural sites for informal arts examined in this report can be imagined and fashioned. These research findings speak loudly and convincingly about one simple point: people prefer engaging, hands-on, artistic experiences over "received" arts programs. This does not mean that they will not recognize, validate, and support the exceptional skills of professional dancers, musicians, singers, and visual artists. This affirmative desire means that people prefer to engage in arts programs and support arts organizations where they can interface with artists *both as audiences and as participants*—to the degree to which this will make sense in each artistic discipline, and in appropriate contexts. This complex articulation of the participatory nature of art versus the exclusionary demands imposed by highly skilled artistic work, is not beyond most people's understanding. A sound and meaningful resolution of this tension for both professionals and amateurs will require inventive accommodations, earnest dialogue, and most of all, a sense of trust among self-defined communities of interest. To help edge things in the direction of this exercise in cultural democracy I offer three recommendations:

(1) Convene a participatory arts "learning community."

There is a smart and highly ethical community of arts practitioners and grassroots intellectuals and community arts advocates in all areas of the arts infrastructure in Silicon Valley, who would welcome the opportunity to gather as a learning community to discuss the implications of the informal arts as a changing paradigm of cultural production and participation locally and nationally. I envision this group initially as a study and support group, and secondarily as a voice of advocacy. This group can convene seminars, study sessions, speakers, and set in motion a deliberate process through which existing informal arts practices and art-making philosophies can be brought in the open, discussed, workshopped, and embraced. It should also be a group that owns its agenda, defines its own limits and possibilities, and comes to a consensus on the short or long term goals of its vision. Also, this present study should be amply analyzed, scrutinized, and updated by the informal/participatory arts participants who supplied the core ethnographic data for the study.

(2) Codify participatory art practices and sites.

Any study is necessarily partial and incomplete. The informal arts nodules brought to light through this study represent only a snapshot of the field at the time in which the research was conducted. More in-depth knowledge is needed of the myriad of art-making opportunities that are incubated inside Silicon Valley companies, through craigslist affinity groups, and at libraries, community colleges, and recreation centers not yet examined. The agents in the best position to create this more complete picture are practitioners themselves, as well as arts funders. These latter should be encouraged to ask questions in their applications and evaluation forms that are capable of capturing the nuanced distinctions between presenting the arts to the community, and affording participatory art-making opportunities. Codification of the informal/participatory arts also means bringing to public light the humanistic potential of participatory activities through communication campaigns, published reports, and visibility in arts policy fora.

(3) Capitalize select participatory projects.

If funds were to become available for a special initiative, there are several opportune conduits of informal arts activity that should be encouraged, documented, and promoted with funding and institutional support. These investments should include opportunities for a strategic group of both incorporated and unincorporated cultural producers and conveners to take their work "to the next level," however each group defines that coordinate. There are multiple opportunities waiting for nonprofit arts organizations to make serious inroads into informal arts publics such as the ones captured by Michael's and other commercial entities. Partnerships that broaden participation and reverse the high/low distinction can be forged across a variety of social registers, constituencies, and locations. I have already listed several interesting examples of art-making at the crossroads of entrepreneurial, commercial, corporate, nonprofit, and independent producers. The ideology that sustains the gap that makes possible these bifurcations should be confronted intellectually and pragmatically through imaginative undertakings by savvy, clever, and highly principled organizations committed to making art "by" the people, and not only "for" the people.

It is beyond the scope of this investigation to suggest how the affirmation of people's desire to be actively engaged in art-making should alter the existing artistic choices and programming structures of arts organizations in Silicon Valley. But not to use this insight to re-think artistic practices, systems of arts delivery, seasons and curatorial decisions, operating priorities, and mission statements would be to miss a critical opportunity for true organizational renewal within Silicon Valley's nonprofit arts community. This re-thinking entails necessarily a substantive questioning of what each organization considers to be viable taste communities within each of their spheres of influence or constituencies. In other words, paraphrasing Stanford Business School

Professor Michael Ray, nonprofit arts organizations would have to answer two fundamental questions: “who is this organization?” and “what is our work?”

Writing about her experiences growing up among working-class and poor Black communities in the American South, writer and scholar bell hooks describes how her own aesthetic sensibilities as a child developed out of a traditional appreciation in her house and among her family for “nice things,” “beautiful objects” that “enhanced life even if their aesthetic standards differed.”⁹³ Similarly, without exception, the informal artists, creative agents, and cultural entrepreneurs contacted through this study vocalized their desire to do what they do out of a necessity for ordinary beauty in their lives, and the possibility of imagining/dreaming up re-fashioned social contracts of democratic participation for their communities. The vernacular folk wisdom that emerges out of the descriptions, stories, and circumstances that I have described in this essay is, therefore, stubbornly idealistic. It is the kind of wisdom that on account of its own simplicity and raw truthfulness can appear “dangerous” or at a minimum, discomfiting to the grand schemes of “Art” as a “social institution.” The message is heard everywhere: art is for everyone. May the heeding be as poetic and sincere as the sound of the words themselves.

Endnotes

- ¹ John Kreidler and Phil Trounstein, *Creative Community Index* (San José, Cultural Initiatives Silicon Valley, 2005)
- ² The headings throughout the report are direct quotes from individuals interviewed during the research process, including the title of the report “There’s Nothing Informal About It.” Their comments highlight different aspects of the informal arts as articulated in everyday settings and speech by artists/participants.
- ³ Arizona folklorist Jim Griffith invokes this reference in his book *Arizona Folk Arts* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1988) but there is no specific attribution identified.
- ⁴ Vrinda Normand, “Lowriders,” *Metro: Silicon Valley’s Weekly* (June 9-15, 2004).
- ⁵ Ibid.
- ⁶ The concept of an “artworld” was first introduced by critic Arthur Danto in a 1964 article in *The Journal of Philosophy*. The thrust of Danto’s argument explained how post-impressionist works of art that represented “reality” and borrowed heavily from popular culture (i.e., Warhol’s Brillo boxes) could be understood as “art” and not simply be mistaken as something else. He asserted that only the acceptance of a certain theory of what constitutes “art” could explain such a difference. In the 1980s, sociologist Howard Becker further elaborated the concept in the book, *Art Worlds* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984) referring to “the complexity of the cooperative networks through which art happens,” or in other words, the social conditions and self-fulfilling definitions and circuits that make a work of art legible as “art” at any given point.
- ⁷ See the proceedings from the panel “Going to the Global Hop: Supporting Multi-Cultural Expression” at the 2004 meeting of Grantmakers in the Arts, www.giarts.org.
- ⁸ See the proceedings from the panel “Finding Civility” at the 2004 meeting of Grantmakers in the Arts, www.giarts.org.
- ⁹ Anthony Cohen, *The Symbolic Construction of Community* (London: Routledge, 1989).
- ¹⁰ See panel “Beyond Art?” at the 2004 meeting of Grantmakers in the Arts, www.giarts.org.
- ¹¹ Jim Griffith, online at <http://dizzy.library.arizona.edu/images/folkarts/>.
- ¹² *Informal Arts: Finding Cohesion, Capacity, and Other Cultural Benefits in Unexpected Places* (Chicago: Chicago Center for Arts Policy, 2002); available online at <http://artspolicy.colum.edu/publications.html>.
- ¹³ “Newsmaker: Interview with Dr. Alaka Wali,” *Philanthropy News Digest*, The Foundation Center (2005); available at <http://fdncenter.org/pnd>.
- ¹⁴ Tom Borrup, “The Administration of Cultural Democracy: Three Experiments,” Community Arts Network, www.communityarts.net/readingroom/archive/50bor-rupintro.php.

- ¹⁵ See Walter W. Powell and Paul J. DiMaggio, *The New Institutionalism in Organizational Analysis* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991).
- ¹⁶ Mark Sidel, "Books for Understanding the Nonprofit Sector and Philanthropy," in Association of American University Presses, website <http://aaupnet.org/news/bfu/nonprofit/list.html>.
- ¹⁷ Peter Dobkin Hall, *Inventing the Nonprofit Sector* (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 1992).
- ¹⁸ See Jennifer A. Gonzalez, "Rhetoric of the Object: Material Memory and the Artwork of Amalia Mesa-Bains" *Visual Anthropology Review* 9:1, (Spring 1993).
- ¹⁹ As an example of this thinking process in a major American foundation, see the comments by Claudine Brown from the Nathan Cummings Foundation, New York, at the Community Arts Network, http://www.communityarts.net/readingroom/archivefiles/2003/02/support_for_art.php.
- ²⁰ Most notably, see Richard Florida, *The Rise of the Creative Class: And How It's Transforming Work, Leisure, Community, and Everyday Life* (New York: Perseus Books, 2002); and Robert Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2001).
- ²¹ Two of the most widely influential texts from this era would include: Robert Bellah, et. al., eds. *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996); and Daniel Bell, *The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism*, 20th Anniversary Edition (New York: Harper Collins, 1996).
- ²² In the field of sociology, key texts regarding this problematic include the writings of Edmund Burke, Ferdinand Tonnies, and Robert Redfield, among many others.
- ²³ Pia Moriarty, *Immigrant Participatory Arts: An Insight into Community-building in the Silicon Valley* (San José: Cultural Initiatives Silicon Valley, 2004).
- ²⁴ John Dewey, *Art as Experience* (New York: Perigee Books, 1980).
- ²⁵ Transcribed interview from field research. Throughout this essay we have reserved the right to keep our informant's identities anonymous or to name them when their identities are relevant to the points being made. We secured permission to identify all informants' by their real names; however, in some instances, we have deemed that attribution is not necessary.
- ²⁶ See Carol Dabb's website for a sample of the kinds of corporate art activities referenced here, www.cdabbart.com.
- ²⁷ *Annual Report 2002/2003* (San José: Arts Council Silicon Valley, 2003).
- ²⁸ Thanks to arts consultant Carol Dabb for this information.
- ²⁹ Sir Peter Hall, *Cities in Civilization* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1998).
- ³⁰ Kim Welsh and Doug Henton, *The Creative Community* (San José: Cultural Initiatives Silicon Valley, 2000).

- ³¹ The personal role that William Hewlett and David Packard played in this regard as art collectors and patrons, and later on through the beneficence of their family foundations was, and continues to be, significant to the arts in Silicon Valley and beyond. Famed scientist, and Syntex Corporation founder, writer and Stanford professor, Carl Djerassi continues his support of individual artists through the Djerassi Artist Residency Program that he founded. There are numerous similar stories that have not been documented here.
- ³² Sir Peter Hall, *Cities in Civilization* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1998).
- ³³ See, for example, the essay by Paul DiMaggio, "Cultural Entrepreneurship in 19th Century Boston," in Paul DiMaggio, ed., *Nonprofit Enterprise in the Arts* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986).
- ³⁴ See www.hprecreation.com.
- ³⁵ See the HP Symphony website at <http://www.yefchak.com/hpsymphony/index.htm>.
- ³⁶ For example, see the recommendations of the San José's first cultural plan, *Arts 20/20* (San José: City of San José, 1988).
- ³⁷ The idea for such an art exhibit, and the same title were borrowed in 2005 by Victoria County, Texas at the prompting of the Victoria Cultural Council. See story online at http://www.thevictoriaadvocate.com/county_by_county/victoria/story/2781691p-3219971c.html.
- ³⁸ *The Denver Business Journal*, May 14, 2002.
- ³⁹ See <http://www.adobe.com/aboutadobe/careeropp/about.html>.
- ⁴⁰ Blake White, "Silicon Valley Culture: One-Dimensional 'Faustian Bargain' or Multi-Faceted Forerunner of Global Society?" July 2003, Student Papers section of The Silicon Valley Cultures Project Website, <http://www2.sjsu.edu/depts/anthropology/svcp/SVCPsvcl.html#Introduction>.
- ⁴¹ Jan A. English-Lueck, *Cultures @ Silicon Valley* (Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2002).
- ⁴² Carolyn Tajnai, "From the Valley of Heart's Delight to the Silicon Valley: A Study of Stanford University's Role in the Transformation," Computer Forum, Stanford University, 1996; can be found online at http://www-forum.stanford.edu/forum-staff/carolyn/valley_of_hearts.html.
- ⁴³ Joaquin Hernandez, "Art Celebration this Friday," *Stanford Daily* (April 1, 2004).
- ⁴⁴ Curtis Sittenfeld, "The Most Creative Man in Silicon Valley," www.fastcompany.com, Issue 35, June 2000.
- ⁴⁵ See the "How They Got Game" website at <http://hpslab.stanford.edu:16080/projects/HTGG/>.
- ⁴⁶ Ben Whaley, "Conference debates video games as art," *Stanford Daily*, (February 9, 2004).

- ⁴⁷ See the cover story in *Time Magazine*, (May 23, 2005), regarding Bill Gates and Microsoft's unveiling of the new X-Box, and the secondary story "Masters of the Game," featuring four visionaries who are taking video games to new heights of artistic sophistication.
- ⁴⁸ Diana Dinh, "The Gaming Geek Culture," Spring 2002, Student Papers section of The Silicon Valley Cultures Project Website, <http://www2.sjsu.edu/depts/anthropology/svcp/SVCPgeek.html>.
- ⁴⁹ Anny Lin, "Lecture series showcases possibilities of fusing engineering and art," *Stanford Daily* (April 29, 2004).
- ⁵⁰ Janet Kornblum, "Web board craigslist makes a name for itself," *USA Today* (September 28, 2004).
- ⁵¹ Figures come from www.craigslist.org, "Facts and Figures" page. Craigslist is customized by user's postings per geographic area. The original and largest localized bulletin is the one for "SF Bay Area" but other sites of intense activity include Boston, Chicago, Los Angeles, New York, Portland, and most other major American cities.
- ⁵² Heidi Kriz, "Silicon Valley's Overtime Mandate," *Wired News* (July 13, 1999), www.wired.com.
- ⁵³ Marianne Messina, "Studio Studies," *Metro: Silicon Valley's Weekly* (April 28-May 4, 2004).
- ⁵⁴ Interview with John Kreidler, by Maribel Alvarez, March 16, 2004.
- ⁵⁵ Peter Drucker, *The New Realities* (New York: HarperCollins, 1989).
- ⁵⁶ Scott DeVaney, "PAC Rats," *The Wave Magazine* (September 8, 2004).
- ⁵⁷ Arlene Goldbard, "Overlaps, Intersections and Conflicts: An Introduction to Arts and Culture," *Community Arts Network*, March 2002, www.communityarts.net.
- ⁵⁸ Comment from a panelist at the Silicon Valley Arts Summit, May 7, 2004, Mexican Heritage Plaza, author's personal notes.
- ⁵⁹ Vera Zolberg, *Constructing a Sociology of the Arts* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990).
- ⁶⁰ Ibid.
- ⁶¹ Marian Lu, "Boom-box balloting," *San Jose Mercury News* (June 20, 2004).
- ⁶² Gary Singh, "Art Smart," *Metro: Silicon Valley's Weekly Newspaper* (October 10, 2002).
- ⁶³ Emily Landes, "Free Art!," *The Wave Magazine* (March 24, 2004).
- ⁶⁴ From the corporate website, www.michaels.com, section titled "About Us."
- ⁶⁵ See the book by Laura Rowley, *On Target: How the World's Hottest Retailer Hit a Bullseye* (New York: Wiley, 2003).
- ⁶⁶ Cited in the company's website, www.petroglyph.com.

- ⁶⁷ Michele Chandler, "Art studios for amateurs are expanding," *San Jose Mercury News* (2004).
- ⁶⁸ For an elaborate and highly provocative academic analysis of this point see Miranda Joseph, *Against the Romance of Community* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002).
- ⁶⁹ Civil society refers to an "arena of uncoerced collective action" populated by charitable organizations, non-governmental community-based organizations, professional associations, trade unions, self-help groups, coalitions and advocacy groups and other such free associations of social actors. See the London School of Economics' Center for Study of Civil Society webpage for definitions and papers elaborating on this theme, <http://www.lse.ac.uk/collections/CCS/>.
- ⁷⁰ Anonymous, personal communication, 2004.
- ⁷¹ See section on "cultural indicators" in *Creative Community Index: Measuring Progress Toward a Vibrant Silicon Valley* (San José: Cultural Initiatives Silicon Valley, 2001).
- ⁷² Joli Jensen, *Is Art Good for Us?* (New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 2002).
- ⁷³ Arts discourses do not happen in a vacuum. The broader field of social, political, economic dynamics in which arts discourses emerge and circulate must also be taken into account when assessing the ideological nature and consequences of cultural arguments. The "art-as-improvement" paradigm may take different shapes and serve different ends in various political climates and moments; it can range from being an elitist argument directed at "feeble" sectors of society to being transformed as a tool of cultural resistance by marginalized groups.
- ⁷⁴ See entry by Joli Jensen, "It's not about the spinach," *Arts Journal*, Daily Archive (March 7, 2005), www.artsjournal.org.
- ⁷⁵ See Bill Ivey's entry, *Arts Journal*, Daily Archive (March 7, 2005), www.artsjournal.org.
- ⁷⁶ Borrup, Community Arts Network, <http://www.communityarts.net/readingroom/archive/50borrupintro.php>.
- ⁷⁷ For more detailed and comprehensive analyses of this point see, for example, Steven C. Dubin, *Bureaucratizing the Muse: Public Funds and the Cultural Worker* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987); Donna M. Binkiewicz, *Federalizing the Muse: United States Arts Policy and the NEA, 1965-1980* (Durham: University of North Carolina Press, 2004); and more recently the book by James Bau Graves, *Cultural Democracy: The Arts, Community, and the Public Purpose* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2005).
- ⁷⁸ Entry by Phil Kennicott, "The Enemy?" *Arts Journal*, Daily Archive (March 7, 2005), www.artsjournal.com.
- ⁷⁹ Comments in response to Douglas McLennan's "Welcome," *Arts Journal*, Daily Archive (March 6, 2005), www.artsjournal.com.

⁸⁰ See for example retreat transcript, 2003 Silicon Valley Arts Summit, www.artsopolis.com/images/panelists/arts.summit.04.retreat.memo.doc.

⁸¹ *Creative Community Index: Measuring Progress Toward a Vibrant Silicon Valley* (San José: Cultural Initiatives Silicon Valley, 2001)

⁸² See for instance the popular books by John Daido Loori, *The Zen of Creativity: Cultivating Your Artistic Life* (New York: Ballantine Books, 2004); Michael Gelb, *How to Think Like Leonardo da Vinci* (New York: Dell Books, 2000); as well as several books by Richard Florida and Robert Putnam. See also academic essays on this topic in the *Journal of Creative Behavior* and the *Creative Research Journal*.

⁸³ For a recent lively and extensive online conversation on this very same topic see the archive for “Is There a Better Case to be Made for the Arts?” *Arts Journal*, www.artsjournal.org.

⁸⁴ Clifford Geertz, *Local Knowledge: Further Essays in Interpretative Anthropology* (New York: Basic Books, 1983).

⁸⁵ Cited in *Creative Community Index: Measuring Progress Toward a Vibrant Silicon Valley* (San José: Cultural Initiatives Silicon Valley, 2001).

⁸⁶ I borrow and modify this term from Lawrence W. Levine, who in his seminal work *Highbrow/Lowbrow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988) refers to the historical creation of an order and hierarchy in “the arts” in America as the “sacralization of culture,” that is, removing the value that culture accrues from ordinary life and elevating it as a form of transcendental “capital.”

⁸⁷ An important exception to this norm is the work of the Arts Council Silicon Valley’s granting program called “Community Arts Fund” as discussed elsewhere in this report.

⁸⁸ All of these examples are actually performed by local art organizations in the Santa Clara Valley region; in the order in which they are mentioned they refer respectively to: Opera San José, San Jose Chamber Orchestra, Triton Museum of Art, San Jose Taiko, T  atro Vision, and MACLA.

⁸⁹ The California Humanities Council initiated a program similar in scope by launching a massive effort across hundreds of public libraries in the state by which people formed local circles that read and discussed John Steinbeck’s *The Grapes of Wrath*.

⁹⁰ Bill Ivey, “Toward a Twenty-first Century Arts Agenda,” *Grantmakers in the Arts READER* (Spring 2005).

⁹¹ See James Bau Graves’ *Cultural Democracy: The Arts, Community, and the Public Purpose* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2004).

⁹² Source is the British Library Net located at <http://pages.britishlibrary.net/blwww3/3way/civilsoc.htm>.

⁹³ bell hooks, *Art On My Mind: Visual Politics* (New York: The New Press, 1995).

Acknowledgements

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