CHAPTER FIVE
COMMUNITY AND COMMUNICABILITY

There are some works of art that stupid people will never understand because they weren’t made for stupid people.

Robert Hughes, "Vanity Fair’s Hall of Fame"
(Vanity Fair, December 2000)

IN HIS 2000 STUDY OF PHILOSOPHER Gilles Deleuze, John Rajchman discusses Deleuze’s long-standing interest in the therapeutic power of art and aesthetic experience. According to Rajchman, Deleuze identifies a “parallel movement” between art and philosophy during the modern period. Each, in its own way, addresses one of the most pressing questions facing us in the twentieth century: How do we reduce the violence and hatred that have so often marked human social interaction? How do we, in short, lead a “nonfascist” life? For Deleuze this question is directly related to processes of representation (of self to other, of the individual to the group, of image to object). What intrigues Deleuze about modern art is its persistent concern with an ethics of representation, the “great struggle” as Rajchman writes, “to free sensation . . . from clichés . . . We live in a civilization of clichés, in which the whole question is precisely to extract a genuine image.” Clichés reduce and trivialize the infinite complexity of the world around us, sanctioning an agressive and hostile relationship to difference. To “break out of stupidity,” according to Rajchman, “a certain violence is required: a shock, an ‘alienation effect,’ or else some sort of ‘cruelty.’ The effect of this shock will be the creation of a “foreign language . . . to be spoken by a people that does not yet exist.”1

One would be hard-pressed to devise a more succinct catalog of the avant-garde tradition that I outlined earlier in this book, from Clive Bell to the Russian formalists, from Greenberg to Lyotard. Here we have the paradoxical combination of a call to challenge negation and violence in the act of representation (embodied in cliché) with an equally vociferous demand for “shock” and “cruelty” toward the viewer. And here again we encounter two strikingly different models of this same viewer. On the one hand we have the hapless dupe, immersed in a world of vulgar kitsch and awaiting the adjudication and correction of the artist. And on the other we have the liberated viewer-to-be, whose existence is promised by the utopian potential of the “authentic” image. In between lies a consciousness-altering encounter with the avant-garde work of art, which will free sensory experience from the chains of reified thought. It was Deleuze’s genius to devise a history of the avant-garde that is considerably more complex, and less parochial, than that traditionally provided by art critics and historians. Further, he offers us a way to understand dialogical projects as existing on a continuum with earlier avant-garde practices: they share a concern with challenging stereotypes and fixed models of identity and cultivating an openness to difference.2 At the same time, as the outline above suggests, there are significant differences between these two approaches, which I explore in greater detail in this chapter.

The artists and groups that I discuss in this book maintain a healthy skepticism about the compromised position of art in modern society: its reduction to a fashionable commodity, its role in legitimating corporate wealth, its tiresome recycling of épater les bourgeois naughtiness. Yet they also remain deeply committed to its emancipatory potential. Many of these artists view the history of modernism less as a series of stylistic or formal experiments than as an unfolding exploration of identity and violence. While they were all exposed early in their careers to the claim that aesthetic experience can transform human consciousness, they began to question the means by which this utopian transformation might be produced. They seek to activate this potential, not through the manipulation of representational codes in painting or sculpture, but through processes of dialogue and collaborative production. As I have suggested, the broader philosophical discourse represented by figures such as
Deleuze, Lyotard, and Levinas is directly relevant to the issues raised by this work, even as it perpetuates certain tendencies, specific to the avant-garde tradition, that are less conciliatory. An equally important resource can be found in Jean-Luc Nancy’s work on the politics of community. Nancy returns us to the issues of community and identity that I began to raise in Chapter 4.

JEAN-LUC NANCY AND THE POLITICS OF COMMUNITY

In his influential book *The Inoperative Community* (published in French in 1987 and translated into English in 1991), Nancy attempts to salvage some concept of community out of the disaster of modern world history and the skepticism of poststructuralist thought. On the one hand, community has been compromised by the history of twentieth-century totalitarianism, in which a fictive mass identity (e.g., “German-ness” during the Nazi era) is maintained through the negation of a pariah population. On the other, poststructuralist thinkers such as Jean-François Lyotard and Gilles Deleuze have questioned collective forms of identification, challenging conventional notions of a coherent self and the broader concept of a body politic. While the idea of community has rightly come under attack, Nancy nonetheless believes that it retains a crucial importance, marking out a space from which to challenge the atomizing and disabling forces of “political and technological economies.” But to reclaim community we must first redefine it. As Nancy writes, “[H]ow can the community without essence (the community that is neither ‘people’ nor ‘nation,’ neither ‘destiny’ nor ‘generic humanity,’ etc.) be presented as such? That is, what might a politics be that does not stem from the will to realize an essence? How can we be receptive to the meaning of our multiple, dispersed, mortally fragmented existences, which nonetheless only make sense by existing in common?”

Conventional models of community are premised on the concept of centered, self-identical subjects coming into communion through the mutual recognition of a shared essence. But for Nancy, our identities are always in negotiation, always in the process of being formed and re-formed through our encounters with others. The anxiety produced by this sense of dependence triggers the aggressive closure of the fascist collective (what Nancy terms an “essentialist” community). In a nonfascist community we accept, rather than deny, the fact of our underlying mutability. The recognition of our decentered, nonessentialist condition, far from evoking a sense of loss or disconnection, actually binds us to others in a common sense of “finiteness” (forming what Nancy terms an “inoperative” community). This “finitude” challenges our tendency to perpetually expand our egos into the world around us, projecting our sense of a priori selfhood onto others and measuring others against it. Community is produced through our recognition that we have no “substantial identity” (and our consequent realization that this lack of identity must in fact be shared by others). This account thus turns Kant’s *sensus communis* “inside out” (as Nancy would say); instead of intuiting the existence of a common sense, we intuit a common lack of identity.

We are, in fact, not individuals at all, but “singularities,” according to Nancy, bound together at a prediscursive level at which the negation of others is impossible because we do not yet function as autonomous, self-identical subjects. We are always/already linked to others by virtue of an “original or ontological sociality” that precedes our very identity as thinking beings. But how do we rediscover our status as singularities? How do we quell the aggressive drive of the ego and achieve a Zen-like sense of our own finitude? Nancy’s surprising solution is to redefine community around the experience of mortality. For Nancy, the ability to recognize our own lack of fixity or permanence is made possible by the other’s death, which has the effect of “exposing our finitude.” We form community with the other, not via discourse or dialogue, but through the affective spectacle of his or her demise, which “seizes us and draws us beyond ourselves.” As Nancy writes, with death the “specular arrangement (of recognition of the self in the other, which presupposes the recognition of the other in oneself, and, consequently, the agency of the subject) is . . . turned inside out like a glove: I recognize that in the death of the other there is nothing recognizable.” Only in death can the other safely afford to communicate with us, to “draw us out of ourselves.” (One thinks here of Michael Fried’s attempt to safeguard aesthetic authenticity by demanding that the work of art refuse to acknowledge the viewer’s presence.) There can be no risk of negation, no fear that the entire m罹olent machinery of Hegelian recognition will come creaking to life like some ontological Frankenstein monster, if the interlocutor has ceased to exist, leaving only his or her body to be contemplated as a ruin or cipher.

Wochenklausur’s “boat colloquies,” Lacy’s parking garage dialogues, and Willats’s tower-block collaborations all share a concern with what Nancy describes as a “being-outside-self,” in which the participants think, act, and speak beyond their a priori roles and identities. Nancy writes of the “being of communication” as opposed to the act of “subject rep-
constructs intersubjective experience as essentially specular (it is the image of the other's dead body that evokes community) rather than as a process that could be carried on through either verbal or physical interaction (shared labor, collaborative co-production, dialogue, etc.). Or rather, his account of intersubjective experience is based on a problematic distinction between specular and discursive forms of interaction. Indeed, there is nothing about the experience of death per se that necessarily prevents its reduction to cliché and spectacle. Second, Nancy's description of community reiterates the avant-garde rhetoric that I outlined earlier in this book. To produce a properly "inoperative" community, the "myth" of an essentialist community must be violently "interrupted" through the application of a somatic shock. The shock of the other's death awakens in the viewer an intuition of his or her finitude. Drawing on the work of Georges Bataille, Nancy celebrates the "nocturnal terrors" and "ecstatic spasms that are spread by death." Here again, the negation that Nancy is so anxious to minimize in his description of our relationship to alterity in general is reasserted in his image of the coherent subject in need of some aggressive sensory derangement. Further, Nancy's concept of a violent break or rupture, capable of profoundly altering the subject through a single, instantaneous encounter, is marked by a certain lack of nuance. Identity (and community itself) is defined synchronically rather than diachronically: either fascist or infinitely open and ecstatic. Or rather, the acceptable form of identity is always coming into being, while the unacceptable form remains terminably static.

I would argue that dialogical encounters seldom involve a complete suspension of identity. Rather, identity is only partially transformed. These partial transformations can no doubt accumulate over time, and the aggregate effect may be to radically transform subjectivity or identity. But the idea that this transformation is acceptable only if it occurs in the form of a single, epiphanic confrontation "engendered" by the artist (as I will discuss below) or the dead body of the other is problematic. By applying such a stringent, and specific, standard to the constitution of an ethical community, Nancy effectively exiles vast areas of human collective experience to the wilderness of incipient fascism. Communication, in whatever form, must involve some ontological and temporal framework (however provisional) within which to speak as well as listen. In fact, this provisional identity is implicit in Nancy's belief that one of the defining conditions of the "inoperative" community is a critical perception of the contingency of community and identity itself. The capacity


resenting," marking the distinction between a dialogical encounter in which subjectivity itself is transformed (cf. my discussion of Habermas in Chapter 3) and a communicative interaction staged by fixed subjects enunciating or "representing" preexisting judgments. A particularly apropos example of this occurs in WochenKlausur's Intervention to Improve the Conduct of Public Debate, produced in Nuremberg in 2000. The project involved a series of thirty-two discussions, staged in specially designed pavilions in Nuremberg, Erlangen, and Fürth, between adversaries in public debates over homosexual marriage, the deportation of asylum seekers, homelessness, environmental regulations, and other issues (fig. 23). Although some of the dialogues ended in deadlock, others produced surprising levels of consilience. One of the most extended dialogues occurred between representatives of Germania, an ultrarightist student society, and anarchist punks. At the same time, Nancy's account of the process by which "being-outside-self" is achieved conflicts with the conditions of dialogical practice at several key points. First, Nancy is insistent that an ethical community cannot be realized through communicative interaction. Like Lyotard, he finds it impossible to imagine a form of dialogue that could challenge, rather than reinforce, an essentialist identity. Further, Nancy...
for critical perception requires a subject with at least a partially coherent identity. Nancy's work tends to invoke a series of Manichean oppositions that accord an intrinsic ethical value to rupture over stasis, incoherence over fixity, ambiguity over predictability, and so on. But the description of coherence and incoherence as two ethically weighted alternatives between which one would ostensibly choose does nothing to convey the process of oscillation that I have outlined above. What happens when the subject, inevitably, recovers? What are the pragmatic implications for his or her conduct in the wake of such an encounter?

To clarify my approach to this question it is necessary to refer back to the dialogical mode of identity that I outlined in Chapter 3. I drew there on the feminist concept of a "procedural" knowledge in which the dialogical participant, instead of being driven solely by the force of logic, attempts to understand the social context from which his or her interlocutors are speaking (a context defined by individual and collective cultural discourses as well as variable forms of oppression and privilege). This understanding is facilitated by the empathetic insight made available through a process of active listening. Our existing identities do not simply dissolve upon contact with difference. Rather, they maintain a provisional coherence, leaving us open to the transformative experience of others, yet retaining a sufficiently material sense of self for this experience to leave a lasting impression.

THE INOPERATIVE AVANT-GARDE

Nancy's work has exercised a significant influence on recent discussions of community-based art. Not surprisingly, in these discussions we often encounter the same tension between the utopian goal of community (the cultivation of a nonfascist subjectivity) and the means of its achievement (a hierarchical system in which the viewer is subordinated to the ethical mastery of the artist) and the same suspicion of discursive interaction. Art historian Miwon Kwon provides a symptomatic example of this tendency in a 1998 paper for the American Photography Institute (API). Kwon begins by criticizing essentialist community formations that require the assertion of a monolithic collectivity over and against the specific identities of its constituent members and those who are seen as outside its (arbitrary) boundaries. Communities of this sort are populated by "unified subjects," as Kwon writes, who view themselves as part of "discrete social formations," rather than as "mutable" and indefinite singularities. To correct this tendency artists and architects working with the public must convey the "impossibility of total consolidation, wholeness and unity." They must think of community not as "an existing social relation" but as a "call or appeal to a collective praxis." "Community-based art then can be approached as a productive enterprise, rather than a descriptive enterprise, wherein a provisional community can be produced within the specific context instigated, either by an artist or a cultural institution." 13

If any collective identity is inherently corrupt, then the only legitimate goal of community art practice is to challenge or unsettle the viewer's reliance on such forms of identification. As a result, Kwon is highly skeptical of art projects that conceive of community members not as singularities-in-waiting but as members of an existing collective. She criticizes Simon Greenman and Christopher Sperandio's We Got It! The Workforce Makes the Candy of Their Dreams project and Kate Ericson and Mel Ziegler's Eminent Domain project (both from curator Mary Jane Jacob's "Culture in Action" program) because they involved union members and public housing residents, respectively. She argues that in each case the a priori constitution of the collaborators as workers or tenants led them to produce "predictable" projects that simply reinforced their existing sense of identity and prevented them from achieving a properly critical awareness of the ethical compromises entailed by this collective status. Kwon expands on this criticism in her book One Place after Another: Site-Specific Art and Locational Identity, warning of the "easy correspondence" established in such projects between the participants' identity and particular social issues. Further, Kwon contends that projects that address collectively experienced forms of oppression run the risk of reinforcing the status of their collaborators as "victimized yet resilient" others, reducing them to mere ciphers of resistance. For Kwon the possibility that collaborations with collective entities (like unions or tenants' groups) will "affirm rather than disturb the viewer's sense of self" is simply too great. As a result, the only path left open to the community-based artist is to follow Nancy and produce works that create community by pointing to its impossibility. According to Kwon the artist is uniquely positioned to "activate" or "engender" inoperative communities based on "the productive possibility of uncertainty." His or her projects should "raise questions" and "unsettle" viewers, making them "uncomfortable" about who they are. Kwon's reading marks the fortuitous symmetry between Nancy's theoretical work and recent art practices concerned with institutional critique (e.g., those of Fred Wilson, Renee Green, and Andrea Fraser). Self-reflexive critique emerges as the only legitimate form of
knowledge, providing the basis for a nonessentialist community and, by extension, the primary content of advanced art.

When asked for examples of an “appropriately critical” community art practice during her API talk, Kwon offered the work of Critical Art Ensemble (CAE). CAE’s projects include installations, performances, computer-based works, and actions that, to use their own description, “explore and critique models of representation used in capitalist political-economy to sustain and promote authoritarian policies.” More recent projects have addressed the political and social impact of new technologies. Typically these projects take on an overtly pedagogical relationship to the viewer, combining a parodic reworking of conventional technical language and imagery (as in the “Cloning Project” in Flesh Machine) with a critical text of some sort. In their essay “Observations on Collective Cultural Action,” CAE criticizes community art projects in which “bureaucratic experts . . . represent the community and tailor the project to their specifications.” Within this process, “[W]ho has actually spoken?” The members of CAE will escape the compromises of bureaucracy by withdrawing into a monadic “cell,” refusing to speak on behalf of anyone but themselves and venturing forth in a suitably radicalized form to challenge entrenched institutions with performances, installations, and artists’ books. They thus offer as an alternative to the discredited concept of community the conventional function of an artistic avant-garde. This stance depends on the ideal of autonomy (the artist who is able to stand outside the social order and reflect back critically on its shortcomings, bringing the shock of his or her insight to the benumbed viewer). Yet they refuse to grant this same autonomy to community art practitioners, whose relationship to their collaborators can never be anything but contingent on and compromised by external political forces.

Given their extreme skepticism regarding the politics of community, it seems unlikely that the members of CAE would want to be identified as community-based artists in the first place. Moreover, it is not clear that their work offers a significant resolution to the problems that Kwon identifies with more conventional forms of community art. The critical insights that CAE generates, rather than result from a process of open-ended exchange with a given audience, viewer, or co-participant, are produced within their own core group of artists, technicians, and academics and then distributed outward in the form of essays, performances, pamphlets, and so on. While there is nothing wrong with this working method, it is no less prone to negation than the projects that

Kwon criticizes. Rather, one form of potential paternalism (that of the artist/expert “speaking on behalf of” the community) is simply replaced with another (the artist/expert bringing the gift of critical insight to the implicitly flawed viewer). Kwon objects to the projects involving tenants and union members because they suppress the unique identity of individual collaborators under the false coherence of a collective identity or social issue. But one could argue that the projects of CAE are equally reliant on stereotypes and generalizations, as the specific identity of the individual viewer is subsumed into the generalized “community” of the unenlightened.

In both her API talk and her book, Kwon criticizes my concept of a “politically coherent community,” which I present in Chapter 4.20 I developed this concept in response to the (often unintentional) forms of negation that can occur when artists view their collaborators as a kind of inert raw material to be transformed or improved in some way. I suggest that this attitude can be reinforced by the privileged position of artists within the collaborative encounter (by virtue of their affiliation with sponsoring institutions, the powerful symbolic capital implied by the subject position of “artist,” and the a priori differences of race and class that sometimes separate them from the communities with which they work). I argue that this particular form of negation is less likely to occur in projects in which the community is viewed as an inchoate aggregate (awaiting the artist’s transformative attentions) than in projects created with groups that have struggled to define their political identity and interests prior to the process of collaborative production.21

Kwon contends that this analysis is reductive and essentializing. Drawing on the work of social theorist Iris Marion Young, she links the concept of a politically coherent community to a “nostalgic fantasy of pre-urban existence . . . assumed to have been without alienation.”22 Given the attention I have devoted to exploring the contingency of the signifying relationship between delegates and communities, I find Kwon’s interpretation slightly puzzling. However, I think she suspects me of trying to smuggle essentialism in by the back door, so to speak, with the concept of a politically coherent community. There may well be a grain of truth to this charge. After developing my critique of community-based practice, I was confronted by the contradiction between the unrelenting purism that drives a certain kind of theoretical reflection (one that orients criticism around the postulation of ideal or hypothetical models of identity) and the pragmatic demands of artists working in social movements here and now.
Kwon’s critique reflects a broader set of questions within contemporary critical theory as well. She argues that politically coherent communities are more, rather than less, vulnerable to appropriation because they make use of collective identities (e.g., “union worker,” “Chicano”) that in her view simply replicate the oppressive categorization of others by the dominant social order. In the very act of claiming these identities, individual community members subject themselves to a form of epistemological violence that effectively compromises any future action on their part. But there is clearly a significant difference between, for example, the articulation of black identity by figures like Dhoruba Bin Wahad or bell hooks and by conservative politicians who use images of young black “superpredators” to mobilize white voters, or between the concept of La Raza and the stereotypes of Chicano gangs in a film like Training Day. It is the difference between naming and being named, and the profoundly different forms of political agency that each of these actions represents. This crucial difference is collapsed in Kwon’s analysis. Kwon returns us to familiar territory in the avant-garde tradition. The only appropriate attitude toward collective experience (framed through shared cultural discourse, material conditions, and so on) is skepticism and critique. Although I am sure she does not intend it, it is hard to avoid the implication that union workers and public housing tenants simply do not know any better than to embrace these forms of experience and that it is the artist’s responsibility to instill them with a properly self-reflexive attitude.

Kwon presents us with a stark contrast between “bureaucratic” community art projects that engage in proscribed forms of political representation and agency (the “community of mythic unity,” as she describes it) and an art practice that is concerned with calling community into question through a critical epiphany intended to produce nonessentialist subjects. Like a postmodern profession of faith, the only relevant measure of political efficacy is whether viewer/collaborators are forced to acknowledge the error of their investment in a coherent sense of self and to embrace the deeper truth of their “split” or incoherent nature. This is certainly a legitimate goal for community-based art practice. However, Kwon’s privileging of “uncertainty” over “predictability,” and “mutability” over “coherence” effectively consigns a great deal of work in this field to the realm of apostasy. How, one might ask, does this insight apply in practice? Should the members of an African American community who establish some solidarity around a resistance to environmental racism be faulted for their reliance on a “coherent” identity? Kwon does not seem to grasp the pragmatic consequences of her exclusive focus on self-critique or the particular privilege implied by her casual dismissal of the political fulcrum provided by collective identities and voices in social struggles. I agree with Kwon that unpredictability is an essential part of community-based practice (e.g., the unanticipated new insights that emerge from collaborative interactions or dialogical encounters). But, as I have suggested above, I would challenge the assertion that the only insights that “count” politically, aesthetically, or creatively are those that explore the contingency of collective identity or that position the artist as an epistemologically privileged provocateur. I contend that identity is somewhat more complex than this formulation allows. As I suggest in the remainder of this chapter, it is possible to define oneself through solidarity with others while at the same recognizing the contingent nature of this identification.

**LA FAMILIA AND THE POLITICS OF COHERENCE**

I share Kwon’s concern with the compromises involved in the “bureaucratization” of community-based practices. However, as I discussed in Chapter 4, my criticism is not that any form of collective identity is inherently and irrevocably repressive but rather that particular categories generated out of dominant political discourse (“at-risk youth,” “the underprivileged,” etc.) have the effect of constructing the target population as an implicitly defective but malleable resource. (This is the basis for my criticism of Dawn Dedeaux’s work.) The overwhelming fear of negation that is so evident in Nancy’s work, and the resulting ethical/ontological absolutism (inextricably evil coherence vs. intrinsically good incoherence), manifests itself in Kwon’s tendency to reject the idea of a coherent community per se instead of attending to the complex differences within the continuum of relative coherence. I would suggest that new and unanticipated forms of knowledge can be produced through dialogical encounters with politically coherent communities.

An interesting example can be found in a project developed in Arizona in 1999 by a young artist named Cristen Crujido. In organizing the project (El Proyecto Milagro), Crujido worked closely with migrant Mexican farm laborers employed on Sycamore Farm, outside Phoenix. Through a series of extended conversations with the workers (who came primarily from the northern states of Durango and Sonora), Crujido discovered a complex set of values and beliefs associated with what the workers called la familia, a collective identity constructed around both
their shared class and cultural identification as Mexican workers and the contingent circumstances that brought them together specifically at Sycamore Farms. As she writes:

A variety of factors have created this “familia.” . . . Perhaps the most important . . . is the shared experience of being a migrant worker. Each community member speaks of fathers, grandfathers, and great-grandfathers who were also migrant workers. They speak of their ancestors’ similar familiarity with long-term isolation from friends and family, rejection from Anglo society, illegal deportations, theft as well as abuse by police and border officials, and the uncertain migrant journey from Mexico to the United States to look for “honorable” work to feed, clothe and educate their families in Mexico.27

Henry Escobar, one of the laborers, told Crujido, “We live together, work together, eat together, and share our day’s events with one another day after day, month after month, year after year. This is a family. This is what a migrant community is. We are with each other more than with our families in Mexico.” While the workers embrace la familia, they are also cognizant that it is temporary; the increasing reliance on automated farm machinery in the West Valley is gradually decreasing the number of workers hired back each year. Clearly, la familia for these workers is not some totalitarian fantasy but a highly nuanced and fluid term. They seem eminently capable of recognizing the contingency of this “community” while at the same time using it to mark out their shared experience as immigrant workers in a foreign and often hostile country. Far from needing an artist to “create” community for them or to school them in the dangers of essentialism, the workers at Sycamore Farms were able to teach Crujido something about collectivity. They possessed a sufficiently coherent sense of their own cultural and political identity (as la familia) to interact with Crujido as something other than isolated individuals, yet they were also able to recognize the pragmatic (and precarious) nature of this identity. For her part, Crujido began the project not as an avant-garde artist seeking to lift the veil of illusion from their eyes but as a collaborator, opening herself to their specific histories and lived experience.

Simply getting access to the laborers in the first place took some effort; Crujido had to overcome the resistance of area farm owners who viewed her with suspicion. Eventually she found a farmer who would allow her to meet directly with the workers. From these conversations she learned of the strong climate of anti-immigrant racism in the area around Wadell, Arizona (the location of Sycamore Farms). She already had some familiarity with these attitudes herself, having grown up in the area, but found that the workers were especially vulnerable to them. In particular, their customs and culture were actively discouraged and even openly disparaged by many Anglo residents. One custom that played an especially important role in linking them to their families and friends back in Mexico involved the use of small metal milagros (from “miracle”) as votive offerings. The milagros come in various shapes, symbolizing their relationship to specific problems or wishes. (Concern about a medical problem might be represented by a milagro in the form of a given body part; a father’s anxiety about his child’s performance in school might be represented by a milagro in the form of a test paper.) Milagros are typically placed in niches in a village or town church, or in roadside altars or home shrines. The churches in Wadell, however, refused to allow the milagros to be displayed, and in some cases farm owners in the area even tried to prevent the workers from carrying them on their persons.

Out of the conversations that took place between Crujido and the workers, the idea gradually evolved to create an outdoor milagro altar, to be placed at a crossroads at Sycamore Farms that was widely traveled by the workers on their way to and from the fields. Crujido developed the specific sculptural form (six poured concrete slabs, each with ten to fifteen niches for various milagros, along with candles, poems, photographs, letters, and retablos). Each of the six forms would be dedicated to a particular type of milagro (chest and heart, legs and feet, arms and hands; head; family and friends; and animals), with a representative tin relief at the top. El Proyecto Milagro typifies dialogical practice: Crujido’s goal was not to shock or improve her collaborators, and although the project involved the production of a physical object, its intended audience consisted of the community of laborers with whom Crujido collaborated. Moreover, the form of the piece, the efficiency with which it responded to a specific aspect of the workers’ experience, was found on, and preceded by, a process of dialogue and collective exchange. Although the project made use of Crujido’s skills as a sculptor (in the design and fabrication of the concrete forms), it required an equally important capacity for active listening and empathetic identification, a willingness to let the laborers guide her, rather than an imposition of her own a priori critical or formal values on them.

As Proyecto Milagro suggests, collective identity is not only, or always, essentializing. Rather, members of coherent communities are often quite
capable of recognizing the contingent nature of that coherence. A recent project in the United Kingdom by the Nigerian-born artist Toro Adeniran-Kane (Mama Toro) demonstrates the capacity of tightly knit communities to approach difference from a position of dialogical openness rather than defensive hostility, forming provisional alliances across boundaries of race, ethnicity, and geography. Toro’s work was part of the “ArtBarns: After Kurt Schwitters” exhibition organized in the United Kingdom by Projects Environment (now Littoral) in the summer of 1999. “ArtBarns” was staged in the hill-farming region of the Forest of Bowland in Lancashire and involved a series of collaborative projects between artists and farmers. Organizers Ian Hunter and Celia Larner sought to commission works that would address the economic and cultural crisis facing small-scale farmers after European Union policies forced the United Kingdom to reduce farm subsidies. Small farmers in Bowland have been hit especially hard. Suicide rates in the area increased dramatically over the past decade as EU policies combined with a decline in commodity prices to drive many long-established farmers out of business; as they go, an entire rural culture is disappearing with them.

Hunter and Larner noticed the striking contrast between government subsidies for art in the Forest of Bowland (almost £1.5 million have been spent on sculpture trails within a fifty-mile radius of the area) and the relative public indifference to the plight of the people who actually live and work there. This cultural subsidy is directly linked to a larger shift in the economy of the British countryside toward tourism and recreation, on the one hand, and large-scale corporate farming on the other. Further, because the farmers have traditionally relied on government support (some 40 percent of their income is derived from farming subsidies), they are often attacked in the press for “living on the dole.” The farming community in Bowland was anxious to challenge these images and to reach an urban, middle-class audience (individuals who are likely to have never been on a small farm before) in order to provide a more sympathetic portrayal of their way of life. In this sense their interest in collaborating on the “ArtBarns” project was quite pragmatic; they sought to generate goodwill among Britain’s urban voters in the hope that they would lend their support to continued farm subsidies in general and the Hill Farming Initiative specifically.

Hunter and Larner saw the project as a way to use the cultural cachet of contemporary art to bring city dwellers into the countryside, to give them some awareness of the (often invisible) process of food production and some understanding of a culture that is quite different from their own. At the same time, they hoped to provide artists with the opportunity to challenge their understanding of audience and context by pairing them up with a particular farm family who agreed to turn over one of their barns for the duration of the project. The project theme of “ArtBarns” was based on the existence in nearby Cumbria of a partially completed installation by the dada artist Kurt Schwitters, who lived in the area during his exile from Germany in World War II. Schwitters’s “Merzbarn” (created on the property of a sympathetic farmer) was his last major work. The ArtBarn became the framing device for projects that ranged from radio stations and a barn and hill-farming Web site to sculptural installations and performances. The farmers received a fee for the use of their barns, and a large number of urban visitors who had never been on a farm before came to tour the installations and, in the process, met and interacted with farm families whom they had only previously seen portrayed in the media as parasitic and backward provincials.

Through their curatorial activities and their own art projects, Hunter and Larner have developed a set of ideas associated with what they term “littoral” art practice (in reference to a shore zone between the land and the sea). They use this term to refer to cultural projects that operate at the intersection of disciplines and institutions, combining elements of art, activism, and public policy. Hunter has a particular interest in projects that emerge out of improvisational, nonprofessional forms of creativity, community formation, and problem solving. These “immersive” cultural practices involve working beyond many of the normative assumptions of the art world and art institutions, often through long-term collaborative engagements with specific sites and constituencies. As Hunter argues, professions tend to “aestheticize” problems by reducing them to neat, enclosed domains, which imply easy, short term, ‘elegant’ solutions, when in fact most problems are complex and interconnected. Littoral practitioners are defined by their ability to think outside, and across, the parameters of existing disciplinary and professional problem solving. The work of Helen and Newton Harrison, which I discussed in Chapter 2, is typical of this approach. Littoral works are closely aligned with what I have been defining as a “dialogical” art practice.

In a talk given after the “ArtBarns” project was completed, Hunter expressed his concern that many of the commissions failed to result in the long-term collaborative interactions he had hoped to encourage: in some cases artists simply used the barn as a picturesque site to locate already created works or as the backdrop for conventional forms of installation
art, taking little time to interact with, learn from, and respond to the farmers themselves. The project that Mama Toro produced for “ArtBarns,” _A Better Life for Rural Women_, was an exception to this tendency. Toro was born and raised in Nigeria but has been living in Manchester for many years. She is the international coordinator of African Women’s Arts and Development (AWAD), a support group for African women (both in Africa and abroad) that is dedicated to promoting the work of African women artists and acknowledging their role in the social, economic, and political development of their respective countries. For her “ArtBarns” project, Toro (working with Manchester-based artist Nick Fry) used the traditions of Nigerian wall painting to transform a barn interior into a performance space that was used for dance performances and other activities by African women who traveled to Bowland from Manchester during the course of the exhibition (Manchester has a large African immigrant population) (fig. 24).

Toro defined her role as an artist not simply in terms of the creation of the wall painting but also through the facilitation of dialogue. This performative dimension was evident in a series of conversations that took place between women from Manchester’s African community and the hill-farming families. These dialogues, which were held in the kitchen of one of the farms, led to the shared recognition that the hill-farming community and the African immigrant community had much in common. Many of the women came from small farming villages in Somalia, Nigeria, and Sudan and were more familiar with the rhythms of work and life in the Bowland Forest than they were with the urban lifestyle of Manchester. In this exchange, neither the hill farmers nor the women from Manchester felt compelled to surrender their existing identities (of nationality, race, ethnicity, etc.) in order to constitute a new, provisional community based around their shared material circumstances and experiences (the spatiocultural context of the farming village). A frequent topic of discussion in these dialogues was the limited access that the African women had to fresh produce. Living in working-class neighborhoods in Manchester, they were often forced to shop at overpriced convenience stores and had little access to the fresh vegetables and other staples that would have formed the core of their diet back home. They were particularly concerned about growing health problems in Manchester’s African immigrant community due to this restricted diet. One of the concrete outcomes of their conversations in Bowland was the formation of a buying cooperative allowing them to purchase food directly from the farming community there, thus saving the farmers the money that would have been lost to middlemen and ensuring the women access to fresh produce at a reasonable cost.

One final example of a project that demonstrates a procedural, or process-based, understanding of community comes from _The Art of Change_ (whose work I discussed in Chapter 1). _Between Family Lines_ was produced in 1994 by Loraine Leeson in collaboration with Karen Merkel of Cultural Partnerships and a London-based group called Women against Fundamentalism, which works with women from fundamentalist religious backgrounds who have been victims of domestic abuse. The project was intended to critique the un-self-conscious embrace of “the family” in Great Britain as a utopian “haven in a heartless world” (to cite Christopher Lasch’s study) by pointing to the high levels of violence that actually occur within the family. The project involved the creation of digital photomontages in collaboration with women from fundamentalist religious backgrounds (Catholic, Muslim, Hindu, etc.) who were shunned by their communities after leaving abusive husbands. The montages, along with slide-tape presentations, outline the process by which these women built new family structures for themselves and reinvented their cultural and spir-
"I just think about the nice things about my culture. I throw away all the bad things. I throw away the nastiness, the fanatic religious things because that's not my part of culture. I still have my culture, my identity, as an Iranian and not have any involvement in Islam in it. And that's what I keep, I keep celebrating my New Year, I lay the table, I grow herbs, and I have parties. I have rice and Salak with fish for my New Year day and I respect and keep all the good part of my culture. But nothing beside the nice thing all the bad thrown away!"

**Figure 25.** Sara, from Between Family Lines, Karen Merkel, Cultural Partnerships, and Loraine Leeson, The Art of Change, digital montage and text (1994), 1 x 3 ft., or 30 x 91.5 cm. Courtesy of Loraine Leeson and Karen Merkel.

Material identities, rejecting those aspects of their cultures that were oppressive while preserving those that they felt were of value (figs. 25 and 26). As with Stephen Willats's projects, objects played a central role in the collaborative process, as the women were asked to work with personal possessions that held particular symbolic value for them. These were used as the basis for montages and stories in the final pieces. Between Family Lines, along with the Crujido and the Toro projects, suggests a process of community formation that exists between the extremes of liberatory dissolution and fascist essentialism outlined by Nancy. La familia provides a necessary framework for cultural and political unity among the workers at Sycamore Farms, even as they recognize its contingent and fluid nature. And the African immigrant and hill-farming communities in Manchester and Bowland were able to retain a coherent sense of cultural and political identity while also remaining open to the transformative effects of difference through dialogical exchange. In each case community formation is more accurately viewed as an ongoing process that shifts between moments of relative coherence and incoherence than as an adamantine opposition between the fixed and predictable on the one hand and the hybrid and ambiguous on the other.

**Figure 26.** Ann, from Between Family Lines, Karen Merkel, Cultural Partnerships, and Loraine Leeson, The Art of Change, digital montage and text (1994), 1 x 3 ft., or 30 x 91.5 cm. Courtesy of Loraine Leeson and Karen Merkel.

**Itinerary and Integration**

As projects such as Soul Shadows: Urban Warrior Myths demonstrate, artists need to think critically about the complex negotiations involved in working across boundaries of difference and power. The potential difficulties raised by these projects are exacerbated by the tendency toward a kind of professional itinerancy in current community-based art practice. Dialogue and the trust necessary for dialogical interaction grow out of a sustained relationship in time and space: the co-participation in specific material conditions of existence. But the nature of contemporary art patronage and production works against this kind of sustained commitment. Artists have to earn a living that may require regular relocation due to teaching or other jobs, foundation grants are often oriented around singular projects over a fixed time frame, and the art institutions that provide support for community-based work are accustomed to inviting a well-known practitioner in from the outside for a limited period of time. Many of the mechanisms of engaged arts patronage function to reinforce the view of a given community or constituency as an instrumentalized and fictively monolithic entity to be "serviced" by the visiting artist.
This problem typically increases for artists or collectives as they achieve some fame or visibility in an art world context and find themselves invited to produce works in quite disparate locations and contexts through the patronage of an international network of museums, galleries, non-governmental organizations, schools, and public agencies. These invitations and this kind of recognition can be hard to refuse. But the further artists move from the knowledge base and collaborative networks that they are familiar with, and the more pressure they experience to produce a discrete work in an often limited time frame, the harder it can be to develop the kinds of insights that result from extended dialogical interaction (or to evaluate the long-term impact of a given intervention). Artists’ capacity to grasp the nuances of a given social, cultural, and political system and, more important to understand how to work effectively within this system while preserving their critical autonomy, is seriously eroded when they are simply dropped into a new country with bureaucratic systems, local political dynamics, histories, and cultures of which they are relatively ignorant.

We see something of this contradictory success in the work of Helen and Newton Harrison. In projects that they have developed in the western United States (the Serpentine Lattice in the Pacific Northwest or the Arroyo Seco Release project in Pasadena, California), their capacity to represent a given ecosystem is complemented by their grasp of the complex political forces acting on that system (the role, for example, of timber companies in destroying watersheds or the function of the US Forest Service in both altering and challenging this process). As a result, the mythopoetic power to generate compelling stories and visual metaphors capable of representing the possible transformation of these sites is grounded in a clearly articulated analysis of the economic, political, and institutional forces that can either impede or facilitate that transformation. As they have taken up commissions further and further afield, however, the accumulated knowledge they can bring to bear on the ecosystems and political economy of the West Coast of the United States is less relevant, and they become increasingly dependent on the specific contacts and specialists provided by the sponsoring institutions. Voices that run contrary to official wisdom often take longer to locate and are more difficult to hear. There is a tendency in some of these projects for the political acuity and specificity of the works they have produced closer to home to recede. In their projects in Israel, Tibet, and Yugoslavia, for example, one sometimes has the impression that a given ecological site has been abstracted from the complex geopolitical forces acting on it. The commissioning process can also encourage the reliance on a routinized “Harrison” style (a large-scale land use plan requiring the coordination and mobilization of a sizable administrative apparatus) that may or may not be the most effective response to a given ecosystem or site.

The problems of itinerancy are not insurmountable. Stephen Willats, whose work I discussed in Chapter 3, returns to the same sites over a period of several years (this is also the case with some of the Harrisons’ projects). Another solution is found in arts organizations that build ongoing relationships with specific neighborhoods. The East Bay Institute for Urban Arts in Oakland, the Manchester Craftsman’s Guild in Pittsburgh, and Artlink in Donegal, Ireland, for example, have developed innovative programs with local residents. Moreover, not all projects involve the same degree of border crossing. In some cases the artist functions less as a well-intentioned but privileged outsider and more as an integral member of a given community. This is the situation that pertained in the Chicano mural movement in California during the 1960s and 1970s, associated with figures such as Antonio Bernal, the Gonzalez brothers, and Judy Baca in Los Angeles and the Mexican American Liberation Art Front in San Francisco. Baca, in particular, developed a process-driven, collaborative approach in her work with young people in the barrios of LA. The Bogside Artists (William Kelly, Tom Kelly, and Kevin Hasson) in Northern Ireland offer another example from the traditions of mural painting. They have produced a number of murals in Derry City since the 1970s, often in collaboration with young people. They typically generate support for these projects by going door to door, collecting small contributions from their neighbors.

While I have been less concerned with object-based community art practices in this book, collaborative mural production clearly shares a great deal with the modes of dialogical production I have been outlining here. Of particular importance is the commitment by Baca and the Bogside Artists to sustained involvement over time with a specific community in order to deepen knowledge and build trust. The potential for the abuse of “delegation” that I outlined in Chapter 4 is often lessened when artists have a deeper sense of identification with a specific community or receive their primary validation from the community rather than the art world. However, it is not my intention to juxtapose a pure community-based practice, in which the artist merges effortlessly into the organic collective, with an impure practice, in which the artist is forever consigned to the role of compromised outsider. The process of dialogical interaction, as I have outlined it thus far, requires a reciprocal
openness, a willingness to accept the transformative effects of difference, on the part of both the artist and his or her collaborators. Many of the examples of dialogical or community-based work that I have provided in this book involve artists working with individuals from widely varied backgrounds. Moreover, there will always be a degree of privilege implicit in the expressive position taken up by artists, even when they have a long-standing identification with a given community.

Dialogical projects can operate in many different, often overlapping, ways. For example, the projects that Miwon Kwon describes (e.g., by Critical Art Ensemble) are primarily concerned with creating a critically reflexive consciousness among viewers. Here community is defined in terms of a shared recognition of the limits, or “finitude,” of community identity itself. The cultivation of a critical consciousness is often seen as an end in itself, and the artists involved in these projects may find it difficult to reconcile this self-criticaity with the coherence and agency necessary to engage in collective forms of political resistance. There are also the “concrete interventions” of groups like WochenKlausur or artists such as Cristen Crujido. In these cases the idea of self-reflexivity per se is less important than the ability to achieve certain discrete, locally relevant changes in a given social or cultural system (the building of a boardinghouse, changes in the policy governing immigrants in custody, the use of milagros). Counterhegemonic projects (e.g., the works of Stephen Willats or The Art of Change) are premised on the production of a critical community consciousness, but they achieve this consciousness through an extended process of collaborative exchange rather than through the creation of an avant-gardist spectacle. Typically these projects are less focused on a specific, concrete outcome. Thus, while Willats will often work with a given group of estate workers over a period of months or even years, he is not by and large concerned with whether the residents take a specific political or social action as a result of their collaboration with him. Obviously, any given work can operate in more than one register. (Mam Tor’s “ArtBarns” project, for example, challenged fixed definitions of community, but it also led to concrete changes in the distribution of food.)

Finally, some projects use dialogical exchange to enable community participation in a larger political context. In these cases, dialogical interaction is used to ground the forms of speech and agency needed to participate in social struggles involving such coherent entities as corporations, government agencies, and unions. These projects often involve some experience of class or race solidarity as a precondition for collective political action. Concepts of solidarity are antithetical to the values of Nancy’s inoperative community. But how do we avoid dissolving the specificity and historical weight of oppression, injustice, and violence when we dissolve the specificity of the subjects who are the targets of this violence? This is the point at which Nancy’s tendency to privilege fluidity and incoherence, to reject any model of community or identity that is defined, even in part, through its resistance to some “external” force, becomes a strategic liability. In many cases communities are partially formed through the collective experience of oppression by a dominant culture. The recognition of this fact does not require one to adopt an “immanentist” argument about what it is to be black, working class, or queer, for example, but these identities do constitute a strategically significant axis of resistance. Each project needs to be analyzed individually, in terms of the specific identities and histories of the participants. But we also need to recognize that these identities are continually reconstructed around certain operative political categories (of class, race, ethnicity, sexuality, and so on).

Simply pointing to the danger of essentializing terminology is not always a sufficient response to the complex strategic questions raised by these projects. I would suggest that the failure that Miwon Kwon identifies in the works of Grennan and Sperandio and Ericson and Ziegler may have less to do with the artists’ choice to collaborate with union members or public housing residents than with their lack of experience with, or long-term commitment to, these specific constituencies. It is instructive here to consider works by Carole Condé and Karl Beveridge in Toronto or Fred Lonidier in San Diego. Both Lonidier and Condé and Beveridge have developed an activist art practice in collaboration with trade union members over the past twenty years. In Oshawa: A History of Local 222 United Auto Workers of America, CLC (1984), Condé and Beveridge assembled an oral history of UAW Local 222 in Oshawa, Ontario, through interviews and conversations with union members. This history was then reconstructed through a series of photo-text pieces, using stage sets and actors working through various points of crisis and progress in the history of the local over the past half-century (figs. 27 and 28). One insight emerging from Condé and Beveridge’s interviews concerned the important role played by women in the history of the local and the resistance to their participation on the part of male workers. Oshawa traces the gradual acceptance of women into the union through a series of strikes, workplace
conflicts, and debates stretching back to the 1930s. Here the identity of the union is seen not as fixed and monolithic but as continuously negotiated through an ongoing process of resistance, conflict, dialogue, and reconciliation around shared class interests.

Fred Lonidier’s work has also explored the ways in which class identity has been formed and transformed over time through union struggles related to workplace injuries, welfare “reform,” strikes, and trade policies. In projects such as L.A. Public Workers Point to Some Problems (1980), I Like Everything Nothing but Union (1983), Welfare Is Poor Relief (1991), Aztec vs. ATU 1309 (1995), and N.A.F.T.A. (Not a Fair Trade for All) (1997), Lonidier has assembled a complex portrait of labor activism in southern California over the past twenty years, a period of intense conservative and corporate attack on the working class. Like Condé and Beveridge’s work, Lonidier’s projects are based on the long-term relationships he has established with union workers and organizers in his area as an artist and a fellow union member. These relationships have allowed Lonidier to earn the trust of specific workers, to learn from their experiences, and to identify specific points of crisis around which he can produce new works. Lonidier begins each new project with a period of intensive research based on interviews with workers related to a strategically significant issue (organizing struggles, health and safety concerns, changes in public policy affecting workers, etc.). The finished works typically take the form of installations combining photographic images, text, and sometimes video and are exhibited in union halls, community centers, and arts spaces.40

Lonidier’s most recent projects, on the impact of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) on Mexican maquiladora workers, are linked to a broader effort among labor activists to encourage class solidarity across boundaries of national and ethnic difference. This cultural work is extremely important because of the ability of the corporate sector to use these same differences to its advantage in pitting workers and local governments in the United States against those in Mexico, in pur-
suit of the lowest possible wages and tax burdens. While post-Fordist capital may present itself as fluid, mobile, and spatially dispersed, the accrual of profits and the decision-making power that governs the use to which those profits are put remain as coherent and centralized as ever. Fragmentation and incommensurability (offshore labor sourcing or playing on differences in language, gender, and culture to circumvent unionization, for example) are the tools that capital uses to ensure its own continued mobility and the strategic immobilization of its globally dispersed workforce.

Current labor activism on the border focuses on organizing maquiladora workers and on establishing cross-border coalitions and support groups to encourage “worker to worker” solidarity. Lonidier sees his work as part of this larger initiative. In *Not a Fair Trade for All*, he documents the collusion of the Mexican government (under the Institutional Revolutionary Party, or PRI, and the local Parti Acción Nacional in Baja California) and multinational corporations based primarily in the United States to disrupt any attempt to develop independent unions (i.e., outside the control of “official,” PRI-controlled labor federations like the Confederation of Mexican Workers, or CTM). In 1999 it was exhibited at the Universidad Autónoma
de Baja California, which is located in the midst of an industrial zone in Tijuana. (As Lomidier describes it, you can see a maquiladora plant from the gallery’s front doors.) The primary audience for Lomidier’s work is the union members (and potential members) themselves. He usually attempts to secure endorsements from local unions and labor councils, and in the case of the NAFTA project in Tijuana he distributed invitations to Mexican workers at the gates of the local maquiladora plant. At the same time, he hopes to bridge the gap between workers and labor activists and artists and intellectuals, especially those who might have some interest in activist art or working-class politics. Thus Lomidier speaks of a model of engaged art that is developed “not only on behalf of, but alongside, communities in struggle.”

If Lomidier’s installations focus on workplace solidarity, the Environmental Justice Project (EJP) in New Orleans examines the ecological and social impact of capitalism outside the factory gates. The EJP was developed in 1998 by a consortium of activist organizations and grassroots theater groups. Junebug Theater initiated the project in response to the crisis facing predominately working-class African American communities along the River Road, running from New Orleans to Baton Rouge. This ninety-mile stretch of land along the Mississippi River has an extremely high concentration of petrochemical plants, toxic waste incinerators, and landfills. Consequently, the people who live along the River Road have the highest rate of cancer in the United States. They also suffer from a disproportionate incidence of birth defects and miscarriages.

The EJP consisted of a series of theater projects produced by Junebug Theater, Roadside Theater, Appalshop, and Urban Bush Women, among others, working in collaboration with New Orleans–based activist groups including the Gulf Coast Tenants Association, Christian Unity Baptist Church, and the People’s Institute for Survival. Although not properly speaking a visual arts project, the EJP is very much in the spirit of the dialogical, performative works that I have examined thus far. Moreover, it relates directly to the relationship between coherent and incoherent communities raised by Nancy’s writing.

John O’Neal, the founder of the New Orleans–based Junebug Theater, saw the EJP project as a way to respond to the blatant environmental racism evident in the River Road area. Along with Pat Bryant of the Gulf Coast Tenants Association and Jawole Zollar of Urban Bush Women, O’Neal developed the idea for a series of collaborative interactions between theater groups and community-based organizations. One of the first challenges was establishing some common sense of purpose between the theater workers and the community activists. The community organizers tended to see artists as opportunistic outsiders who were ignorant of the complexities of grassroots political struggles, while the theater workers felt that the organizers didn’t respect the unique contribution that they could make to the formation of community solidarity through the performing arts. According to Ron Chisom of the People’s Institute, the first goal was to overcome this suspicion: “The organizers need to know more about the cultural dynamics in their work. The cultural groups need to learn about the difference between just doing a ‘community-based project’ and how to participate in long term organizing work.”

The EJP demonstrates the potential value of dialogical projects that are developed through interactions between artists and members of a politically coherent community. Before the collaborative process of the EJP began, the residents of River Road had already established a sense of solidarity through their shared experiences. At the same time, this sense of solidarity did not prevent them from being open to the new insights that were catalyzed through the creation of the project. Thus a second level of dialogical interaction took place in the production of the actual theater pieces, which relied on the “story circle” technique, in which River Road residents were able to describe, narrate, and exchange their experiences of environmental racism. “When people have the chance to witness their collective stories,” according to Adella Gautier of Junebug, “they get energized, more critical and more powerful as a group.”

The artists, for their part, did not come to the River Road residents with a preexisting plan; rather, they began with a process of active listening, learning from the residents’ personal stories and using these stories as the foundation for a series of plays. Junebug developed a play entitled Don’t Drink the Water that was used by the Gulf Coast Tenants Association in its organizing efforts, and a major festival of new works from the EJP was produced in and around New Orleans in 1998, involving the efforts of fifteen different performing arts groups and community-based organizations.

DIALOGICAL DETERMINISM

In the works of Condé and Beveridge, Fred Lomidier, and the EJP, dialogical exchange is used, not to reveal the “finitude” of community, but rather to provide a consensual ground for public acts of political speech and resistance. The primary goal here is not to problematize race- or class-based identities (although this can be a component of the work,
as we see in Condé and Beveridge’s Oshawa project) but to use them as a point of strategic alliance against forces of oppression that operate by targeting individuals on this basis. I have already described some of the ways in which these projects challenge the concept of an “inoperative” community advocated by Nancy. Nancy’s theory gives us no way to differentiate between the totalitarian “immanence” of fascism and the solidarity of the Gulf Coast Tenants Association. Criticism framed by this theory tends to define resistance primarily by reference to the presumed virtues of incoherence and the refusal of discursive interaction per se.

The projects of Condé and Beveridge, Lonidier, and the EJP also illustrate the limits of my own concern with dialogical aesthetics. Specifically, they suggest the dangers of what I would call “dialogical determinism”: the naive belief that all social conflicts can be resolved through the utopian power of free and open exchange. Despite having spent some time developing a critical framework around dialogical experience, I am also aware of its potential limitations, especially in projects that involve forms of class- or race-based political resistance. Dialogical determinism simply replaces a vulgar Marxist concept of economic determinism with the equally reductive belief that discursive exchange or dialogue has the power, in and of itself, to radically transform social relations. This is problematic for two reasons. First, it overlooks the manifest differentials in power relations that precondition participation in discourse long before we get to the gallery, community center, or meeting room. (This is related to the critiques of Habermas that I outlined in Chapter 3.)

We can attempt to minimize the effect of power on discourse, to point to its effects, but we cannot expect to eliminate it entirely. Dialogical determinism also overlooks the extent to which political change takes place through discursive forms (such as violence or economic manipulation of the electoral system) that are far from open and ideal. Here the essential mediating relationship between discourse and the (imperfect) mechanisms of political or social change is left undeveloped.

Not all conflicts can be resolved by free and open exchange because not all conflicts are the result of a failure among a given set of interlocutors to fully “understand” or empathize with each other. In many cases social conflicts are the result of a very clear understanding of material, economic, and political differences. When Motorola and Nike attempt to frustrate organizing attempts among maquiladora workers, or to locate their plants in countries ruled by dictatorial regimes where unions are violently suppressed, there is a clear recognition that their interests (the drive to maximize profits for their major shareholders) can be served only at the expense of the interests of their workers. The spatial logic of capitalism may have changed over the past century, but the underlying goal (to extract the maximum amount of value out of the labor of workers for the minimum possible expense, whether through automation, outsourcing, speedups, total quality management psychology, or office calendars with inspirational slogans) has remained consistent. One of the most promising sites for future dialogical projects involves the possibilities open to artists working in conjunction with emerging movements for social justice both locally and globally. (Fred Lonidier’s work is particularly significant in this context.)

The complex issues raised by dialogical practices operating at points of race or class conflict are evident in an October 1999 performance in Oakland organized by Suzanne Lacy, Julio Morales, and Unique Holland. The project, titled Code 33: Emergency, Clear the Air, takes its name from the code used by the police to keep radio channels open in an emergency. It builds on the framework established by Lacy and T.E.A.M. in The Roof Is on Fire (1994), which I have already discussed. The project was designed to increase understanding between Oakland police and young people in the city, especially young people of color, whose relationship with the police is often marked by violence, harassment, and fear. As with The Roof Is on Fire, the basic format involved extended public conversations in a parking garage, only in this case the conversations were between police and young people (rather than among the young people themselves), illuminated by the headlights of one hundred police cars (figs. 3.1 and 3.2). This was, in many ways, an exemplary dialogical work. It grew out of the earlier conversations concerning police attitudes in The Roof Is on Fire and was also preceded by a series of community initiatives, including the recruitment of youth-based production teams to create videos about their perceptions of the police, presentations by young people to Oakland’s Neighborhood Crime Prevention Councils, art production mentorships, and efforts to encourage greater interaction between the police and city residents.

The larger goal of the Code 33 project was to challenge the tendency of the police to view all young people of color as potential threats (as criminals or gang members) and the tendency of young people in the city to view all police as racist and/or excessively authoritarian. By creating a framework for empathetic identification between the two groups Lacy, Morales, and Holland encouraged them to perceive each other not as
"abstractions" (the gang-banger or the aggressive cop) but as specific individuals. At the same time, as I have suggested above, the actual Code 33 performance revealed some of the challenges faced by dialogical projects that operate in the context of class and race conflict. On the evening of the performance, a group of about 150 demonstrators appeared in front of the Oakland Federal Building, directly across the street from the parking garage in which Code 33 was unfolding. They were there in response to the recent Supreme Court denial of Mumia Abu Jamal’s death row appeal. Seeing the large media presence at the Code 33 performance, some of the protesters took the opportunity to position themselves in front of the garage with a “Free Mumia” banner. (They probably staged their protest that evening to piggyback on the media presence for Code 33.) Three others actually entered the garage to register their protest. These actions precipitated an immediate response from the police, who used this counterperformance as a justification to close down access to the garage. A planned procession of low-rider cars and police cruisers around the parking garage was also canceled.

As a result, the dialogical exchange of the Code 33 event was overlaid by, and contrasted with, two other performative rhetorics. The actions of the Mumia Abu Jamal protesters, who took advantage of the large media presence attracted by Code 33, represented a conventional oppositional media spectacle (signs and banners, chants, the occupation of public space, etc.). The police orchestrated their own performance, based on the reassertion of spatial mastery, with dozens of officers, additional patrol cars and vans, and even a police helicopter with a searchlight (originally intended as part of the performance) buzzing the roof of the garage. The ability to control urban space (and to subdue resistant urban populations) is key to the authority of the police. It was notable how quickly the benign spectacle of massed police officers sharing their ideas with young people turned into the spectacle of massed police officers cordoning off the garage, turning away the dozens of people at street level who were trying to get into the performance (with little or no explanation), aggressively securing the space around the garage, and cutting off handcuffed protesters in a van. They were particularly concerned to ensure that all of the protesters who had infiltrated the garage were removed, leading to a somewhat haphazard process of differentiating between “protesters” and “legitimate” audience members (a line that some participants crossed simply by asking questions about the arrest process). It is further notable that all of this street-level activity oc-
curred unbeknownst to most of the viewers and participants who had already gained access to the upper levels of the garage (where the Code 33 Performance was concentrated).

The massive deployment of police in downtown Oakland (which was clearly necessary to the image that Lacy and her collaborators were attempting to orchestrate of a police department willing to listen) is open to more than one interpretation. The conflicts that exist in Oakland between a largely white police force and largely black and Hispanic population of young people are not simply the result of empathetic failure but are related as well to the process of gentrification, as longtime working-class residents (primarily black and Hispanic) are being forced out of downtown areas to make way for a white middle- and upper-class population seeking relief from the exorbitant property values of San Francisco. The parking garage in which the project was staged is an emblem, in many ways, of this emerging commuter culture. As such, it had symbolic associations that the Code 33 organizers no doubt didn’t intend. The garage is surrounded by a small island of gentrification that includes commercial and residential developments, health clubs, and coffee shops. While watching the police “performance” from the street, I spoke with one bystander, a black journalist and lifelong Oakland resident, for whose alternate interpretation was obvious. He saw the overt marshaling of police forces in the streets of downtown Oakland, and the sheer excess of their response to the protests, as the kind of comforting spectacle necessary to assure nervous white professionals that the streets of Oakland were safe and under control.

What makes this juxtaposition of performative rhetorics even more interesting is that the Mumia Abu Jamal case is about this “other” image of the police, as racist, corrupt, and violent. (This may have been the reason the Mumia protesters sought to disrupt Code 33 in the first place.) For young people of color in this country, the police are often viewed not as disinterested guardians of public safety but as a potential danger. This perception is not simply the result of a failure of empathetic identification (consider the revelations in 2001 about the Los Angeles Police Department’s antigang units or the epidemic of New York City police shootings of unarmed black men around the same time); rather, it is grounded in the role that largely white (and often suburban) police forces play in patrolling largely black and Hispanic working-class neighborhoods. It has to be understood in the context of a judicial system characterized by a for-profit prison industry, draconian sentencing laws, racially biased capital punishment, and the virtual warehousing of young men of color. The Code 33 project was a great success in seeking to achieve some genuine improvement in the relationship between police and young people in Oakland and no doubt led to real changes in the perceptions of both groups. In addition, the event was widely covered by the media, providing an important counterpoint to the criminalized images of young people of color typical in newspapers and television. At the same time, the project functioned within another, slightly different, discursive context (characterized by police violence, the economic and cultural stresses of gentrification, the role of the police in protecting corporate real estate investments, etc.), within which it took on a more ambiguous symbolism. Code 33 suggests just how difficult it can be to fully bracket “extradialogical” power differences and to at least partially suspend our identifications within dialogical encounters, especially in a situation in which differences of power are so overdetermined (the police, surrounded by their cars, being recorded by the media in a public space). What the police as police most fear is chaos—people or events that they cannot control. The freest dialogue, the kind of dialogue that can encourage openness, vulnerability, and self-transformation, is less likely to take place under the glare of TV news cameras and milling observers. The Code 33 project illustrates the tension that exists between the conditions necessary to produce an effective media image and the conditions necessary for sustained dialogical interaction (which may result in a considerably less “media-genic” scene).

CONCLUSION

In this book I have concentrated on the implications that art history and criticism have for dialogical practices. I want to conclude by turning the tables and discussing some of the implications that these practices have for the disciplines of art history and criticism. As I noted in the introduction, some of the most cogent writing on community-based and dialogical projects comes from the artists themselves. Peter Dunn, Helen and Newton Harrison, Ian Hunter, Jay Koh, Suzanne Lacy, John Latham, Loraine Leeson, Fred Lonidier, Greg Sholette, Stephen Willats, and Wolfgang Zinggl, among many others, have made significant contributions to the literature on activist and community-based practices. At the same time, several of the artists and groups I have discussed are frankly skeptical about the relevance of conventional art history or criticism to their work. They share a general dissatisfaction with the authority and traditions of the institutionalized art world (which they associate with
the musty enclave of the connoisseur and the catalogue raisonné or elitist coterie of wealthy collectors, dealers, and globe-trotting curators) and view the critic or historian as part of this larger legitimating apparatus. What is gained, and what is lost, in defining something called “dialogical” art? Am I imposing fixity on a cultural practice whose goal is to challenge categorical stasis? Am I simply reiterating on an epistemological level the violence and abstraction that so many of these projects seek to challenge? I am also conscious of contributing to an already unwieldy melange of terms: “new genre public art,” “littoral art,” “engaged art,” “community-based art,” and now “dialogical art.” Even as I try to define something called dialogical art, I find it slipping from my grasp as it blurs into grassroots theater, collaborative mural production, and community activism.

While I was researching this book, several artists asked me why I was attempting to situate this work as “art” in the first place. This may seem somewhat disingenuous, since many of the same artists are more than willing to invoke the art status of their work for funding purposes. But I think the deeper implication of this question was: Why bother trying to explain this work to an art historical and critical establishment that has so often treated it with indifference, if not disdain? One of the reasons many practitioners have also written on activist art practice is the relative dearth of critics and historians willing to engage with their work in a substantive manner. So the question remains: What is to be gained by defining this work as art? One could argue that challenging existing definitions of art is the very essence of the modernist project. From the fauvists to the cubists to the dadaists and beyond, the raison d’être of the avant-garde artist has been to reconfigure, question, or expand normative models of art practice. On this basis, then, dialogical art practice is part of a more venerable tradition of self-critique within the history of modernism. But we can no longer measure the march of artistic progress through an internecine warfare in which one movement confidently displaces its predecessor at the leading edge of culture. Postmodern theory has taught us to be deeply skeptical of this sort of linear historical narrative. Dialogical practices may expand our understanding of what art can be, but this does not have to come at the expense of works and traditions that currently exist. Even as dialogical projects challenge the avant-garde tradition at some points, they parallel and complement it at others. Rather than posit a hierarchy between museum-based art and projects developed in nonmuseum environments, it is more appropriate to think of these as two equally productive sites, each with its own appropriate strategies and potential compromises.

A second, and related, issue concerns the status of this work as visual art per se. Although I have relied heavily on resources drawn from art history and theory, my analysis has concentrated primarily on the creative orchestration of dialogical exchange. As a result, I have neglected the visual dimension of these projects, from the Harrisons’ complex maps, to the videos of Street Level Youth Media, to the photomontages of The Art of Change. At the same time, dialogical works are not just visual but aural and tactile as well. Consider Stephen Willats’s concern with perceptions of architectural space, or the physical experience of floating on a lake in WochenKlauser’s boat talks, or the sensation of being above the city but beneath the sky in Suzanne Lacy’s work The Roof Is on Fire. Lacy has spoken of her work in connection to the tradition of the tableau vivant, expressing a common concern among these artists with the creation of a mise-en-scène for dialogical interaction that is as much spatial as visual. There is potentially productive terrain here for an expanded analysis of the aesthetic, especially with reference to concepts of framing and distance.

A second area that I have neglected concerns the possible connections between the idea of a dialogical aesthetic and artistic paradigms based on concepts of networking and communication in recent digital media theory and practice. Dialogical projects confront the critic or historian with a more practical set of concerns as well, related to research methodology. Ideally, the writer should be able to directly witness the unfolding process of dialogical exchange and the various techniques used to facilitate it. Obviously this is a somewhat different matter than wandering through the Museum of Modern Art, notebook in hand, or poring over a monograph. This durational commitment and the ephemeral nature of these projects pose a particular challenge to the researcher. As the Code 33 project demonstrates, the meaning of a given dialogical work is not centered in the physical condition of a single object or in the imaginative capacity of an individual viewer. Instead, the work is constituted as an ensemble of effects, operating at numerous points of discursive interaction. Any given project can be successful at some levels and less successful at others. Criticism of dialogical practices should, in my view, be less concerned with arranging a canonical hierarchy of works than with analyzing, as closely as possible, the interrelated moments of discursive interaction within a given project.
What role should the critic or historian play relative to this work? Or, put another way, who is the audience for this sort of critical and historical writing? During the modern period the critic often functioned to contextualize new practices, making them intelligible to a potentially hostile or indifferent public within the broader traditions of art history. This is the somewhat contradictory position occupied by figures like Clive Bell or Clement Greenberg, who insist that avant-garde art must resist interpretation but whose own critical writing functions to translate this work into a more accessible form. To this extent, then, the function of the critic is closely linked with the ideal of the difficult work of art that plays such a central role in the modern avant-garde. Critics are a bit like lobbyists, whose presence simultaneously facilitates and undermines the process of democratic government. But the individuals who collaborate with Lacy, Leeson, or Willars, the audiences for an installation by the Harrisons, or the participants in a WochenKlausur action do not require the services of a critic to help them understand the significance of their involvement. It is in the very nature of these projects that the role of the critic as a mediator of difficult or inscrutable art is called into question.

The most persuasive argument in support of a critical and historical engagement with this work comes from artists who have been active in the field for several decades. Dialogical projects often leave little or no physical trace due to their ephemeral nature. This situation is exacerbated by the general neglect of mainstream publishers and critics. Often the only record of a major project will be contained in a few journal articles or the personal archive of the artist. Published documentation of the important early activities of Artists Placement Group, to take one example, is extremely difficult to locate. I have often heard older practitioners express their concern that younger artists interested in this area are repeatedly forced to “reinvent the wheel” in the absence of a sustained historical record. I have also been surprised to discover how significant this tenuous tradition is to younger artists, not just in the United States or Europe, but also in South America, South Africa, and Asia, where some of the most compelling new work is emerging. There is an important stake in providing a more coherent historical and critical account of this work, despite the risks of simplification, abstraction, and institutional co-optation. At the same time, my goal here has been, not to impose a rigid or totalizing analytic system on these practices, but simply to offer one possible theoretical framework. This research has been developed over the last decade through a series of ongoing conversations with artists, activists, and writers associated with dialogical practice. These conversations have taught me a great deal about the possibilities of art and have led me to see the history of modern art itself in a different way. This book is my attempt to return something of this gift and to contribute to what I hope will be an ongoing conversation.