

Dialogic Gestures: Doing Artistic Things with Ethnographic Methods

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In a public culture like the one we live in, predicated upon mastery, rationality, order, originality, and efficiency, there's something to be said about the liberating potential of equivocation. The idea of getting things wrong, of not grasping all the dimensions of everything all the time regardless of the availability of technology or charisma, can breathe fresh air into many of our civic projects. It could be argued that the history of the United States parallels the history of art discourse in at least one way: no matter how narrowly self-contained an idea might be and regardless of how many people find it difficult to discern the alleged value at stake of a given masterful project, both pride themselves in "getting it right," often offering nothing less than History to prove their point. A wink, a nod, or a wry "I told you so" usually follows these moments of expert reassurance.

This is why I've always been in favor of creating spaces for artistic/intellectual production that can give artists and ordinary people a chance to test "uncooked" ideas, to borrow and stitch-up at random from a wide variety of approaches, and ultimately to fail and start anew. Something in the order of this phenomenon is present in the paradoxical case of the *Ties that Bind* project that I directed in San Jose, California, from 2000 to 2002.

Ties that Bind was conceived as a multi-layered project that combined social science, art, and humanities and attempted to upset the rigid categories of personal and social identities that many people attributed to Asians and Latinos in Silicon Valley. By revealing through photos, artifacts, oral histories, and community dialogues the messiness and permeability that exchanges of love and desire had wreaked on people largely considered at odds with each other, *Ties that Bind* sought to reveal a story up to that point largely ignored within the officialist mythology of Silicon Valley. As the three writers invited to critique the project suggest in the previous essays, and I agree, there was something both moving and disconcerting about the results achieved by this effort.

Stretching perhaps too ambitiously to find a creative fusion between art and anthropology, the public and the private, the nuanced and the stereotypical, the sexual and the social, diversity and "Americanness," or ultimately, between happiness and anxiety, it is fair to say that, for some of the people involved in the project, in the end *Ties that Bind* fastened more secure than before the binaries that it had sought to destabilize. In this brief reflection, I intend to explore some of the methodological tensions that may account for this phenomenon.

It is quite possible, as Rosaldo suggests in his essay, that the disappointment felt by some of us about the *Ties* project may be a symptom of our own intellectual posturing and unexamined expectations about what art *should* do for "the people" and for social knowledge generally. The art community ("artworld" as some have called it) is known for its own excessive gushes of

unqualified optimism about the “power of art” to change lives.¹ Ever since Art became separated from other practical forms of labor in capitalist societies, there has been a great deal of enthusiasm among the educated classes for the value of artistic/imaginative skills to help people reach their “full potential.” For those of us who are art-lovers or art patrons, this belief runs even deeper. In some instances, deducing from the rhetoric that circulates widely in grant proposals, some of us expect art to do things for society that rather elaborate social policy initiatives have not been able to deliver. That being said, it is possible to state, based on many formal and informal evaluations of the project offered by the people whose faces and stories became the public text of *Ties that Bind*, that the project touched a nerve and provoked many fruitful conversations in the local community. Most recently, the project traveled to Fresno, in Central California, where a second phase of local documentation and dialogue complemented the Silicon Valley “findings.”

The success of *Ties that Bind* in opening up a sustained dialogue on social identities cannot be attributed only to the fact that the art produced reflected people’s stories in a personal way. Much of the project’s significance, both in the local community and in the spectrum of community art practices more generally, derives from the fact that, as one participant told me, “we had never seen artists or a contemporary art gallery work so hard to understand what stands behind the obvious.” As an anthropologist and curator, this was the best compliment I could ever hear.

Yet, for critics, curators, artists, and other connoisseurs, a lingering feeling that “something else” could have been captured seemed to have surfaced early on and stayed throughout the run of the exhibition. It wasn’t necessarily that the aesthetics of the art installations conceived by the artists were off—as Matthews and Rosenfeld remark, MACLA managed to create a compelling visual environment. In addition, ethnographers and artists worked with the participating families in public and private interviews and facilitated dialogues for more than 10 months before the first piece of art for this show was ever sketched. The ethnographic methods employed throughout the “fact-gathering” phase of the project were sound and yielded tons of textured, seasoned insights into the dynamics of ethnicity, social identities, and intimacy in Silicon Valley. Most importantly, for the people whose lives were the subject of the oral histories and exhibition, *Ties* was a deeply meaningful and satisfactory experience.

The problem with *Ties*, it seems to me, was not so much one of production but rather of reception. Some observers of the process (myself included) wanted to be blown out of our socks by the artists’ interpretations of these heady and highly fruitful theoretical subjects we had stumbled upon. In one sense, those of us with these expectations were being rather conventional—calling upon Art to unearth something magical that culture as an ordinary thing had rather obscured.

And yet, before I explore this underpinning ideology any further, I think that it is dangerous and misleading to suggest that the gap of perception here is merely one between the somber “deep” critic and the happy “shallow” informant. Perhaps what lies at the core of this dissonance are different degrees of *belief* in the power and capacity of representations, period. That is, the belief (or trust) in the ability of ethnographers, artists, and intellectuals to “get” what is important to get in any given situation and to represent their knowledge or insights not only more or less accurately but also in tantalizing terms than can ultimately provoke social effects through their products (texts, images, exhibits, symposia, books). Intellectuals and artists are for

¹ For a good treatment of this topic see [Is Art Good for Us? Beliefs about High Culture in American Life](#), Joli Jensen, 2002, Rowman & Littlefield.

the most part sure of their ability to deliver these goods; ordinary people tend for the most part to be more skeptical. This belief in the transparency of meaning seems to hold steady regardless of whether one thinks of culture as bound and fixed or as fragmented and hybrid; the impulse to “capture” the drift of others’ lives and to trust our communicative abilities to represent “it” remains the same. It is precisely there—in the intricacies of that belief system—that I think *Ties that Bind* offers a fascinating study on the politics and poetics of representation. With a large and diverse cadre of experts gazing invasively at 15 mixed-race families—sociologists, historians, anthropologists, art administrators, civic dialogue facilitators, artists, journalists, and philanthropists—the project materialized one of the oldest dilemmas in epistemology: what distinguishes “adequate” knowledge from “inadequate” knowledge? Furthermore, what business is it of artists to attempt to answer this question?

In my experience working with the participating families in the *Ties* project, many of them expected the project to shine *some* light on *some* aspect of their complex lives. Having made the decision to expose their intimate lives for thousands of people to see, they were quite aware that some of the representations would be “on target” and some would “miss the mark”—but in both instances the risk of telling *a* story (*their* story, not *the* story of all intermarriages) was worth taking. It was worth taking, partly, because no one else had bothered to inquire what it was like to be, as one participant put it “not ethnic all the time” (sic), or as another indicated “having to deal with the fact that when you embrace diversity, sometimes it can be painful.”

For MACLA—a small, alternative, ethnic-centered arts space in an urban setting—blowing the cover off these questions on identity was a big deal. MACLA crafted itself carefully as a contemporary arts center rooted in communities of resistance but embracing an eclectic, inclusive, and often deconstructive ethic in its work and its role in the local community. Rather than engage in the kind of work that represented “heritage” and “tradition,” MACLA set out to establish a new framework in Silicon Valley for questioning identities, all the while affirming their currency and the power dynamics that made them visible or invisible. Granted: at times this statement may have been nothing more than a philosophical stand articulated by an Executive Director who had read one too many books on cultural and political theory. But most of the time, felicitously, this stand translated into a programmatic agenda that engaged artists and approximately 18,000 people each year into exciting, inventive, and down-to-earth projects and conversations.

Ties that Bind was a project conceived in the context of these larger organizational concerns. In other words, before there was an Animating Democracy-funded project, there was MACLA and San Jose and the history of the politics of identity in Silicon Valley. These spaces and their dimensions—physical, cultural, and symbolic—were in themselves cultural productions of a sort. In many ways, the terms of the debate had been already set by social dynamics beyond the control of MACLA or the artists. In fact, from his vantage point as a sociologist, Rosenfeld makes the observation that there was very little that was actually unique about intermarriage in Silicon Valley and takes a friendly jab at San Jose (at MACLA in particular) for imagining itself all too eagerly to be “in the middle of the action.” If there was anything original about Silicon Valley Asian-Latino intermarriage as compared to his research on Black-White intermarriage elsewhere, Rosenfeld tells us, it was in fact that the Silicon Valley couples and mixed-race folks here were “less public, less noticed” (and I venture to say that Rosenfeld is too polite and generous to say, actually, less interesting). When compared to other noticeably restless urban areas, ethnicity in Silicon Valley had demonstrated a tendency to morph with a certain ease and harmony into something “irrevocably American,” says Rosenfeld.

This finding surprised artists Lissa Jones and Jennifer Ahn as soon as they began the first home visits. Jones confided in me early on her disappointment for not finding in many of the homes she was visiting “obvious signs of ethnic identity.” The one place where these signs seemed to surface unmediated was in the kitchen—or in little, almost imperceptible rituals of everyday living in the bathroom, the bedroom, the entryways where some mixed-families adopted the tradition of taking off their shoes before entering the home. Rosaldo reacts negatively at first to the almost saccharine quality of the artwork produced after the ethnographic work, and Matthews takes MACLA to task for giving a safe and contained treatment to what cries out to be juicy, sexual material. But I have news for both of them: the artists *did* find sweetness and modesty among these mixed-race couples. Had the artists run away freely with their avant-garde imaginations (more so than they already did by utilizing stained-sheets, washcloths embroidered with racial stereotypes, doors with welcome mats that spelled the word “miscegenation,” or gauze-covered strainers full of faded memories), they would have represented a racy, wicked, and edgy sensibility that simply wasn’t there in the ordinary lives of these folks.

Generally, artists do not bear the same burden of accuracy in representation that sociologists and anthropologists do. One of the goals of the *Ties* project was to test whether artists working with ethnographic methods can navigate through these two subjectivities—that of “researcher” and that of “interpreter”—to find a more balanced resolution to the gap between things as they “really are,” things as people feel and live them, and things as social theorists see them. One of the most compelling arguments to support how effectively *Ties that Bind* tested this principle, indeed, is the fact that in the end the project left everyone equally restless. The artists asked repeatedly and sincerely: did we do right by these families? did we do right by MACLA? The writers and academics asked: what sordid tales lie behind this manicured and happy exercise? The MACLA staff asked itself: what power does a small arts organization have to illuminate social phenomena? Curiously, a sensation that we had barely touched the surface was perhaps the only feeling that the participating families shared with the rest of the stakeholders of this project. Perhaps these multiple interrogations (and equivocations) reveal one of the most interesting lessons to emerge from *Ties that Bind*—the sobering recognition that, as a way of looking at “social facts,” art is still more comfortable in the realm of the imagination. Or put more blatantly, artists make lousy sociologists and sociologists make lousy art critics.

There is always a danger in any kind of cultural analysis to focus too much on the product at hand (in this case the exhibition) and too little on the process that framed the larger social/cultural project. Similarly, in the case of *Ties that Bind* it was all too easy to discuss the merits and shortcomings of the project itself while pushing to the background the contextual and structural dynamics that made *Ties* an intriguing and gutsy *intervention* by a small alternative arts center like MACLA. Matthews struggles to contextualize this important element, but she does not seem to be able to get beyond the fortuitous funding opportunity that made the project possible at this particular time and place. More to the point would be a recognition that MACLA had taken great pains to occupy a peculiar place in the ecology of the art-culture system in San Jose and had predicated much of this claim on its ability to workshop new interventions in the largely predictable field of visual representations in this city. *Ties that Bind* gave MACLA an opportunity to put its money where its mouth was—going beyond the circle of art patrons (or the predictable “outreach” programs to families in need) to people who lived and worked in Silicon Valley and had nothing to do with art and asking them: would you allow us to document your story and then make some artistic representation of it for others to see and discuss?

From our point of view at MACLA, we were not only mining stories for “content” but were also modeling a process that upset the balance of power between artist and subject, moving away

from the archetype of the idiosyncratic/genius artist who sees and represents as he/she wishes, to one where listening and learning was more important than representing. We called upon ethnography (a methodology borrowed from the social sciences) to aid in this task. And yet, the paradox of it all was that in order to engage a broader community in the conversation, we chose the ways and means of visual representation in a gallery to manifest the things we had learned. In some ways, the project became a meditation on a question that many others have pondered—can ethnography “help” art or is it the other way around?²

The long and the short of this experiment was that neither medium of representation—artistic or ethnographic—can claim to be above the fray when representing intimacy or intimate matters. Unless one is willing—in either field—to uphold the representation (the text or the image or the installation) as the only product that really matters, then in every case we have to be prepared to deal with the consequences of representing live/engaged/smart subjects who will talk back and try their hand at shaping the modalities of what is being told about them. The fact that so many of the stories of intermarriage dealt with intimate matters—and not always as happy, exciting stories—placed a certain burden on the artists to be, well, less artistic perhaps. It is one thing to make an enthralling statement about bedroom politics in general and in the abstract; it is an entirely different experience and responsibility when the two people involved in that bed and those politics are standing next to you, in front of your work, during the gallery reception. In this instance, as Rosaldo has eloquently stated, the exhibition had a “social life” that went beyond the art products. But what I find more intriguing (and troubling) about these easy designations of cutting-edge art as “art-for-art’s sake” versus “bland” art as “art with a purpose” is the fact the *Ties* project *did* mobilize and use the aesthetics of contemporary art to make its representations. *Ties* was far from being only an “educational” exhibit. In fact, and here the irony has got to make us laugh, the one thing that the participating family members said again and again that they loved about the exhibit was that it was not made up of “flat, boring pictures on the wall.” Indeed it was the medium of the contemporary art installation that helped so many of the participating families feel respected and dignified as represented in the gallery. The story, one of them told me, was personal but not “too personal” (I think this was a code for saying not “exploited”). Perhaps the art medium became surprisingly reassuring to some of these “informants” because the other choices had already been discredited. I am aware that the only notion of an interpretative exhibition that some of these participants knew had come from anthropological exhibits and their infamous dioramas of frozen-in-time subjects or invasive techniques in search for “juicy” details. In a twist of fate, then, in *Ties that Bind* art redeemed anthropology. Curiously enough, when I conceived of the project, my assumption was that the reverse would happen, that anthropology would help us make better art.

Caught in the midst of this uncomfortable yet fascinating exercise were two artists who for the first time in their lives had dozens of people around them referring to them not simply as “artists” but as “artist-ethnographers.” I am quite sure that neither Jones nor Ahn knew exactly what that meant when they signed up for this project. Although there are some wonderful examples of artists who have successfully used this approach—and we at MACLA had previous experience working closely with one of the best in the field, Pepon Osorio—and in spite of the fact that I had used the ethnographic method to produce an interpretative exhibition on low-rider bicycles a few years before, *Ties* stretched our abilities beyond what we expected. There was one simple reason for this and Rosaldo seems to have thought about it long and hard before he could remember that this is what often happens with ethnography: the subjects of the project requested that the best, juicier, racier, and more poignant stories be kept confidential. Jones and

² An interesting meditation on this question can be found in Schneider, Arnd, 1996 “Uneasy Relationships: Contemporary Artists and Anthropology” *Journal of Material Culture* 1(2) pp183-210

Ahn struggled with this issue. They were asked to serve, not two, but three masters: MACLA asked that they “respond to the community” but still deliver a compelling visual statement using the most transparent of all art media, photography; project participants asked that they not reveal the “painful” aspects of intermarriage: for example, some of the participants were the offspring of broken inter-racial marriages and had grown up all their lives hearing one or the other parent impute racial stereotypes to their former spouse, half of whose “heritage” these children also embodied); and the artworld in which they had developed and emerged as artists asked that they “be true to their vision” and create work that “pushes the envelope” if necessary.

No wonder it was hard to recruit artists to participate in this project. Some would have nothing to do with “ethnography.” Others wanted to interview people but reserve the right to “interpret” the stories as they pleased—with full artistic license. I objected. I wanted something weird: an interpretative exhibit that utilized the tools of contemporary art (installations and so forth) but that did not serve an artist’s idiosyncratic taste but rather the communal vision of the participants/informants. I asked the artists to create new works with what they learned from the subjects of the project, not from what they *thought* the subjects should learn from their “great” art. This made for some tense moments between the artists and me. After all, I was asking that they suspend the very same thing that many would argue made them artists in the first place—an original non-functional representation that would puncture reality—not one necessarily bound to serve any social-welfare purpose.

In the end, my own problems with the project had little to do with either the process or the product, but much more to do with the structural semiotics that seemed to predetermine what was possible to achieve in a project of this nature at a core level. Sure, maybe there were too many references to ginger and chiles in the visual materials. Or maybe the anthropology of it all was lost somewhere in the array of repetitive black and white images with no context other than some questionable metaphors. I can live with those shortcomings. After all, when a project like *Animating Democracy* comes along invoking the metacategories of “community” and “civic dialogue,” the danger for platitudes taking over really good critical work is extremely high. I count MACLA and me lucky that we had a real gritty project, with real people, and real issues to debate.

I do have one regret about the exhibit and that is that the works created were not in themselves more dialogic. I think the participants would have taken more risk with the art—or endorsed the artists taking more risks—if they had been more involved in the design of the exhibition and the installations. If, instead of being an audience to their own stories, they too would have been empowered as artists/creators, somehow. But I have a hard time imagining how I could have given Jones and Ahn that directive on top of all the other demands I placed on them. Nonetheless, there were things in this ambitious, wonderful project that went missing. Rosaldo is right in wishing that sounds and voices could have been heard. Maybe video is a better-suited medium than photography for a project of this nature. Matthews is right in urging for more explicit disclosure of the subtexts in the project that remained obscure to the gallery visitor. Rosenfeld is right in desiring that more public dialogues about the sociological differences between intermarriage in Silicon Valley and other areas could have taken place.

Rosenfeld also introduced in his essay a notion that I now find extremely fruitful for further investigation but that did not occur to me until I read his essay: mixed-race people and couples are “inadvertent performance artists of a sort.” From a conceptual point of view, the analytical framework of “performativity” could be extremely interesting to examine intermarriage and mixed-race subjects. The literature and theory on performance is so well developed, especially

in the context of themes of dissident sexualities and desire: how come I did not think of it before? In a practical, programmatic sense, many things could have been done through performance in the *Ties* project to explore the dynamics of intermarriage—from story circles, to spoken word poets, to plays, symposia, dance, testimonies, etc.

I am reminded, however, that whatever this ethnography and this exhibit captured in this moment in time, in this cross-section of space and culture in San Jose, is what this project yielded and nothing more. With all of its flaws, it was still far from being insignificant. The meaningfulness of this intervention resides precisely in the paradox of its promise and its limitations—in writing its own text and submitting it for scrutiny. In that sense, I am reminded that no matter how crafty and astute anthropologists, artists, and writers become at the art of representing or subverting “reality,” the interventions of art/cultural scribes manipulate reality as much as deconstruct it.

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