

THERE'S NOTHING INFORMAL ABOUT IT

PARTICIPATORY ARTS WITHIN
THE CULTURAL ECOLOGY OF SILICON VALLEY



By Maribel Alvarez, Ph.D.
with research assistance from Lisa van Diggelen

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 1153 Lincoln Avenue, Suite I, San José, California 95125-3009
 Telephone: 408.283.7000, Facsimile: 408.283.2127
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Preface

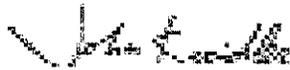
Art is an action that occurs in many places, by many people, and for many reasons. Much art by professional artists and arts institutions is presented in formal arts settings: concert halls, museums, theaters, movie houses, and bookstores. However, much art is also produced by everyday people in informal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

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

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

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

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



John Kreidler
Executive Director

Executive Summary

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

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

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

The study examines three questions:

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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