Communiplaytion: getting our hands dirty together

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COMMUNIPLAYTION:
GETTING OUR HANDS DIRTY TOGETHER

A Thesis
Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
Louisiana State University and
Agricultural and Mechanical College
In partial fulfillment of the
Requirements for the degree of
Master of Fine Arts

in
The School of Art

by
Brooke Tyson Cassady
B.A., Boston University, 2003
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ABSTRACT

CommuniPLAYtion: getting our hands dirty together is a weeklong installation of a collective ceramics studio implanted in Foster Gallery. It is a participatory and interactive exhibition that demonstrates how material play creates moments for personal reflection and contemplation, while also facilitating communication and social relations within a specific place. CommuniPLAYtion is an opportunity for an altruistic exchange among individuals in contrast to the monetary transactions that momentarily connect strangers. These engagements, similar to the “Do-It-Yourself Geopolitics” of other contemporary artists, empower individuals to develop modes of interaction that suit their interpersonal needs.

The exhibition, communiPLAYtion enables the basic precursors that Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs suggests are necessary in order to achieve self-actualization. I orchestrate events to make participants feel safe and respected, in order to encourage a sense of connectedness or belonging. I utilize the research of psychologists and art therapists, especially Carl Roger’s nondirective approach to therapy, to create an inviting and comfortable environment where I can be myself and feel willing to open up to others.

The gallery contains one ton of packaged, wet clay, which enables visitors to make any kind or size of sculpture they choose. Together, participants and I incorporate our work into a central part of the room where a temporary landscape of combined, unfired clay objects emerges. Over the course of the week a larger, collaborative sculpture emerges—a tangible record of the creative efforts of a shared group of participants. The sculpture records the marks of each person, alluding to the value of intangible emotions shared during conversation. Collaborators engage in the phenomenological experience of manipulating wet clay in a collective space with shared tools. As they work alongside one another an intimate dialogue unfolds naturally. The sensuous and malleable material enables and physically validates the emotional connectivity that happens on-site. The haptic experience of revealing vulnerability in public spaces and feeling the positive effects of collaboration engenders “felt knowledge” or self-trust. At the end of the week, the raw clay sculpture is broken down into chunks in order to be used for endless reiterations in other locations. Leaving the clay unfired draws attention to the value of the ephemeral, interpersonal exchange rather and imbues the clay with the agency of the collective experiences that continues to build with each event.
CHAPTER 1. PRELUDES

“The only road to strength is vulnerability.”
—Stephen Nachmanovitch

1.1 GIFT EXCHANGE

Human beings are social creatures. Our human psyche thrives on a sense of belonging and connectivity to something greater than our individual selves. In the past, gift exchange functioned as a way to develop and maintain relationships within a relatively small, localized network of communities. Members of these communities knew each other well enough to trust each other and also knew they were in close enough proximity to hold one another accountable. As communities expanded, the regions of exchange incorporate more communities. This expansion creates greater instances of exchange amongst strangers. In order to compensate for the lack of trust in a stranger, societies established monetary values for goods and services. Over time these financial modes of exchange replace gift exchange. This transition begins to erode social relations. These exchanges, prevalent in a capitalist economy, enable the freedom to purchase goods and services regardless of social relationships, however it appears that in a culture where this is the primary form of exchange, social relations suffer.

“[T]his exchange of gifts—mysterious—settled deep inside me like a sedimentary deposit...I have been a lucky man. To feel the intimacy of brothers is a marvellous thing in life. To feel the affection from those whom we do not know, from those unknown to us, who are watching over our sleep and solitude, over our dangers and weaknesses—that is something still greater and more beautiful because it widens out the boundaries of our being, and unites all living things...That exchange brought home to me for the first time a precious idea: that humanity is somehow together...It won’t surprise you then that I have attempted to give something resiny, earthlike, and fragrant in exchange for human brotherhood...”
—Pablo Neruda

A gift is an invitation to partnership; it implies communication, cherished by any person. Taking part in gift exchange implies a connection to the universe. Gifts do not need to be regulated by law because there is self-interest and desire to reciprocate in order to keep the gift cycle in action. Law is necessary for trade, contracts and bargaining because there is no implied future relationship for fulfilling services or goods, and the participants are strangers trying to make a profit. Gift exchange plays a fundamental role in most societies and is the core of much anthropological research. In particular, Claude Lévi-Strauss argued that gift exchange is not based on accumulation, economics, contest, status, or prestige, rather communication is the aim of interaction: “the agreed transfer of value from one individual to another changes the two partners and ads a new quality to the value transferred.”5 Alfred Gell’s Art and Agency also states art objects perform the role of advancing relationships.6 Gell’s agency theory describes a socially informed individual who acts knowledgeably to reproduce and transform the society they live in. Bill Sillar also acknowledges “perhaps the most fundamental of social constructs is the

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individuals perception of what they are able to do and how they relate to the rest of the social and material world around them.”

Looking through anthropological research illustrates that contemporary society could benefit by incorporating more modes of gift exchange.

The prevalence of social networking on the Internet through Facebook, Twitter, Second Life, and other user-based content websites demonstrates a need and desire for social interaction within current American culture. Online resources are a fundamental part of publicizing and sharing this interaction, however I believe that society as a whole may benefit from a more significant engagement that happens in person through direct involvement in the arts.

Organizations such as StoryCorps prove an overall interest in recording the stories of various Americans from all walks of life. The phenomenon of “weed dating” also shows innovative ways of building relationships. In “weed dating” potential romantic interests spend time with each other in short bursts of weeding (similar to Speed Dating) patches of farmland together.8

It is no surprise that many universities and schools have service-learning programs, where students gain access to classroom curriculum through active engagement in civic responsibility.9 Through service learning, hierarchies of authority dissolve and empowerment occurs on both sides of the equation. Amy Franceschini utilizes a service-learning approach with Future Farmers. She founded this international collective in 1995 to connect artists “with a common interest in creating work that challenges current social, political and economic systems.” Through their Victory Gardens project in San Francisco (VG2009+) they utilize public spaces for urban gardens as a way to bring produce into local communities. The produce is only one part of this exchange:

“VG2009+ has the mission to create and support a citywide network of urban farmers by (1) growing, distributing and supporting home gardens, (2) educating through lessons, exhibitions and web sites and (3) planting demonstration gardens in highly visible public lands; garden at city hall, schools and Golden Gate Park.”10

1.2. PERFORMANCE AND RITUAL

Many contemporary artists illuminate meaningful interaction within everyday activities, which serve a connective role similar to ritual. These events are strongly influenced by Allan Kaprow’s integration of social interactions and everyday experiences into art. Kaprow speaks of his own work, and the role he has of revealing his inner self while helping others find their own:

“I think this sense of what it means to be a social person and the fact that every social person has a private person inside is vital to the sense of community and to any meaningful sense of ‘public’—of public service. The way to get to those issues sometimes is organizational and structural, but often it has to do with compassion, with play, with touching the inner self in every individual who recognizes that the next individual has a similar self. And it is that community, whether literal or metaphorical, that is in fact the real public that we as artists might address.”11

Exploring the internal self through play and connecting with others in a community through compassion are essential for social cohesion. Anthropological research also shows humanity’s existence

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heavily relies on ritual unification. Rituals occur during times of transition between one state and another: such as childbirth, puberty, marriage, illness, harvest, and death. Ellen Dissanayake is an Affiliate Professor of Music at the University of Washington. She is known for her interdisciplinary study of anthropology, sociology, biology, musicology, art history and ethology. Her research focuses on the psychobiological tendency and evolutionary relevance for art-making behavior. From her research she finds, “As people focus, respond, and participate together, they feel bound together. And such collaboration helps to relieve stress and anxiety about the subjects of the ceremonies—finding food, assuring fertility and prosperity, healing, being safe in battle or the hunt.”12 Rituals provide relief for the economic pressures that contemporary American society faces. These include being able to afford food and housing, as well as encounter issues of political terrorism and social alienation. Dissanayake states ritual has "the ability to shape and thereby exert some measure of control over the untidy material of everyday life.”13 Rituals found in religious organizations, veterans associations, self-help groups, and others continue to function as a way of communally dealing with the resulting anxiety and uncertainty. Rituals address sentiment rarely articulated.

In many traditional societies, crafts hold a position of keeping clans, tribes, and social networks together. In modern Western societies, they also have this capacity, though it is easier to find in select crafts communities. In particular, black Americans in Gee’s Bend, Alabama continue to use quilting as a way to protect and nurture family through making utilitarian objects. These quilts hold encoded information and make use of discarded materials. They record identity, lineage, and individuality, in a non-threatening and innocuous way—once essential for slaves living on plantations. Piecing quilts in a group, while singing together, was and continues to provide an avenue for these communities to stay tied to the past. Quilting together provides continuity: a bridge across generations, where tools, techniques, methods, and shared experiences become tools of socialization. Quilting is a venue for maintaining humanity under terrible conditions.14 Similar to rituals and piecing quilts, clay has a cathartic and meditative effect. Bending, stretching and squeezing clay can feel therapeutic for the body and the mind.

1.3 The Significance of Touch, Haptic Knowledge and Phenomenology

Touch stimulates a more creative and less analytical approach. Touch is a way of exploring the world though tactile, kinetic, tangible and haptic processes.15 Film and video critic, Laura U. Marks, describes haptic perception as “the combination of tactile, kinesthetic, and proprioceptive functions, the way we experience touch both on the surface and inside our bodies.”16 Peter Dormer also writes about the significance of tacit knowledge as the experiential and explicit knowledge distinctly found working in the crafts.17 Clay, in particular, has remarkable potential to capture and make marks and to test ideas. Perhaps it is this plasticity, smoothness, and grit that engages the 90,000 sensory receptors on our fingertips to initiate immediately awareness of our own agency in the smallest of ways, controlling touch and being aware of the stage/state of the material.

The right side of the brain perceives and maps where in the body it is responding to touch. It is the part of the brain that helps us process how others interact with us physically and intimately. There is more space allocated to the sensory perception for the hands than any other part of the body.18 This proves the significance touch has in the evolution of the human race. The value of touch can also be seen

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12 Tim Steury, "What is Art For?,” Washington State Magazine (Washington State University), 2009.
16 Marks, 2.
in the reaction from one participant who spent over six hours at my C.O.W. table during a bike festival art opening. When she came over and joined me she said, “I need to start making things with my hands before I get too old! I just need to slow down and play more!” At the end of the event, she was shocked that she hadn’t even taken the time to look at the other art. She said to me, “Wow, I guess I really needed this. Thank you. I didn’t even need to do anything else here or see the show.”

Creating an environment like communiPLAYtion enables a phenomenological experience, a direct knowledge of the world through lived experience and sensory awareness. The Situationists, in particular were a group of artists interested in the biological unity of humans and the power of the body on the mind. It is believed that post-Cartesian thought separated the body and the mind as two distinct, independent entities. The Situationists aimed to connect the two by drawing attention to the importance of conscious, lived experience of the world as recorded through our bodily interaction with it. In the Handbook of Material Culture, Julian Thomas addresses Martin Heidegger’s and Maurice Merlau Ponty’s phenomenology. He discusses that an “investigation of the haptic qualities of objects might prove productive, particularly in the context of the mass-produced material culture of the contemporary West, where the impact of phenomenological thought has been slim.” This philosophy begins to explain how interactive artwork can connect with the user on a variety of substantial levels.

Biologically we still need connective activities such as rituals and other phenomenologically rich experiences to maintain relationships with each other. Art critic Patricia C. Phillips recognizes this human condition: “In spite of the many signs of retreat and withdrawal, most people remain in need of and even desirous of an invigorated, active idea of public.”

1.4 MONOLOGUE

I personally need a way to make myself visible in a public space to give people a reason to come talk to me. Social interactions can be the root of anxiety for me. In these moments, I physically feel bound and restricted—my shoulders tense and my chest tightens. Consciously or unconsciously, I feel myself trying to protect my fragile body and emotions. I constrict and pull away from public places, people and interactions. I want to be alone. There are times when I feel paralyzed by the idea of going out into the public world.

I want people to feel comfortable to approach me. I want to break down some of the social barriers that I feel in public spaces—the sort of unspoken boundaries of privacy in public. My intention is not to violate or disrespect others. I need a way to work that disrupts my assumptions of personal and cultural boundaries that seem inherent in social patterns and habits.

Over time, I continue to challenge myself to reveal more of my vulnerability in public, and to my surprise, I gain trust in myself and in others that is greater than what I had in the beginning. Marcel Proust coined the phrase “courageous vulnerability” to describe the significance of this experience, which entails a level of effort and openness that is required to achieve a sense of “felt knowledge.” Felt knowledge is akin to a certain level of trust. It is a knowledge gained from personal experience which grounds and affirms mental processes in the physical experiences of the body. I find immense value in the challenges and moments of surrender that are necessary in order to open up and connect with others. Working with others to develop new skills and relationships often provides the opportunity to experience something akin to this “felt knowledge.”

21 Thomas, 57.
22 Lacy, 20.
My studio practice centers on the tactile and tangible qualities of materials and a personal desire to understand human interactions and relationships. Time spent in the studio proves crucial to me in order to process the external world. It is helpful, and it can also be a place I retreat to or hide. It is a delicate balance of mediating public and private space. I want to feel comfortable opening up to others, but I often find the majority of public, social situations difficult places to interact.

Creative practices play a large role in mediating these social tensions. For some people, art communicates; expresses and channels emotion; reiterates social values; and provides an outlet for shared experience. I find the experience of physically working with clay has the ability to connect individuals during an altruistic and intimate exchange. The act of working in a tactile material provides tangible validation of the potent interaction between collaborators. The physical evidence validates the interpersonal and intrapersonal exchange, which in the end has the potential to outlive the tangibility of the finished objects. It is a simple, basic experience of developing rapport with strangers and potentially making something in clay together, that I seek not only to capture, but also create and heighten personal awareness of its validity. Acknowledging others is a miniscule act with a monumental reward. The opportunities for interpersonal exchanges that draw awareness to our very presence as a significant, individual human being seem few and far between in my daily life.

In order to address this absence, I facilitate and coordinate events in public that develop my own sense of self-actualization and empowerment. I find ways to bring different versions of my clay studio to various public places where people are prone to gather. Through instigating an unscripted interaction I acknowledge the value of myself and others. I agree with Lynne Sowder, an independent curator, when she says, “We need to find ways not to educate audiences for art but to build structures that share the power inherent in making culture with as many people as possible. How can we change the disposition of exclusiveness that lies at the heart of cultural life in the United States?”

I share the opportunity to engage with other people as a means of illuminating the intangible, interpersonal and intrapersonal dialogue that occurs when people have the opportunity to voluntarily work with clay in a shared space together. Sharing my studio practice in public gives me a visible, tangible reason to open myself up to others. It is a compassionate gesture towards togetherness. It is a difficult and challenging experience and yet the resulting interaction is almost always positive. Walt Whitman writes about this feeling of expansion within the form of gift exchange inherent in art making:

“When we are in the spirit of the gift we love to feel our bodies open outward. The ego’s firmness has its virtues, but at some point we seek the slow dilation in which the ego enjoys a widening give-and-take with the world and it’s finally abandoned in ripeness.”

I find when I make myself vulnerable other people are willing to share their vulnerabilities with me. Using clay facilitates this interaction. Touching clay is intimate; feeling its response is cathartic. Clay also has an ability to function as a social lubricant. Working as a potter for several years I personally became aware of the self-reflective nature of clay. I also noticed when I would teach ceramics classes that clay has an intrinsic quality –people share information and intimate details of their lives with others when they begin to touch the material.

Bending, stretching and squeezing clay can feel therapeutic for the body and the mind. Clay is primeval; it is one of the first materials we learn to manipulate as children. It is soft, malleable, and does not require percussive or intrusive tools, such as knives, mallets, hammers or chisels as intermediaries or extensions of the hand in order to change its form. It responds immediately to touch and can record details as intimate as fingerprints. Paulus Berensohn, ceramist, dancer, and self-proclaimed deep ecologist is known to say that “whatever we touch is touching us” and he applies that specifically to

25 Lacy, 31.
clay. As we experience what it means to move the material physically the material moves us emotionally, psychologically, and spiritually. There are few other materials that are so readily transformed by gentle actions of the hand and that can transform into something so durable.

This immediacy and connection to touch seems to stimulate awareness within us and enable communication with each other. It embodies haptic exploration, which enables an understanding of self and surroundings, through physically manipulating a material. Touch is a way of exploring the world through tactile, kinetic, tangible and haptic processes. When I touch clay I feel the material move instantly with the pressure and guidance of my hands—it responds to every move I make. When someone touches clay for the first time, or after a long time away from the material, face begins to reveal an expression of serene excitement.

Clay requires a present consciousness of the material. It is a small act where I can witness my progress in a tangible form. Using the clay when it is wet and pliable heightens my awareness of my emotional state when working the material. If I am anxious, I tend to force the material, which then makes me struggle even more. This process is not exclusive to ceramics, but clay requires experience and sensitivity to the amount of moisture within in it and around it. Without proper experience this can be frustrating. First, the clay begins to harden too fast from being in contact with my warm hands. I add water to soften it; it becomes pliable. Then the clay becomes wet and mushy and will not hold its shape. I become aware of my impatience, drying or wetting the clay too fast. I see this happen frequently with students, as they get frustrated, their shoulders tense and their grip tightens. I intentionally try to remove expectations from the event to prevent these anxieties from developing. Clay requires patience and kinetic knowledge or awareness of the material.

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CHAPTER 2. DIRECTING COMMUNIPLAYTION: A PLAY IN THREE ACTS

The exhibition, communiPLAYtion: getting our hands dirty together is a play in three acts. CommuniPLAYtion takes the lead of the thesis and Clay on Wheels (C.O.W.) and the Seedpod Exchange Effort (S.E.E.) are supporting actors, taking place before, during, and after the event.

2.1 ACT 1: CLAY ON WHEELS (C.O.W.)

Beginning in the fall of 2009, I built a six-foot-long bike cart, Clay on Wheels (C.O.W.) to transport a small version of my studio to share the experience of working with others in clay with a broader audience. I travel through neighborhoods in Baton Rouge, New Orleans, and Lafayette and set up a temporary studio at coffee shops, festivals, art shows, parks, and other places where people usually congregate.

The cart is spray-painted black and white and adorned with cowbell. The logo is simple, silly and visible at a distance—the cow’s tongue happily dangles outside of its mouth and has bike handlebars for horns. Inviting and humorous signage encourages others to talk to me. The C.O.W. logo and cart disarms people, resulting in a smile or laugh, which becomes an entry point for discussion and conversation. It is essential that the participants approach me on their own terms in order to establish trust. The spontaneous and improvisational nature of C.O.W. also enables people to join in the process before they can develop expectations. These events give me a chance to role-play myself-as-extrovert, breaking out of my patterns of introversion, which in turn create an element of security for participants and myself.

Image 1 (left). Clay on Wheels (C.O.W.) at Perks Coffee and Tea, Baton Rouge, LA
Image 2 (right). Clay on Wheels (C.O.W.) at Festival Acadian et Creole, Lafayette, LA
I also utilize the awkward format of C.O.W. to garner attention. C.O.W. is an abnormally large apparatus attached to the back of my bike, which often generates enough interest to pull people in. In many ways this project also defies rationality and simplicity. Clay is heavy; it requires studio space, tools, equipment, kilns, water, and many other things. Its working characteristics are completely dependent on ambient temperatures and humidity. Furthermore, once something is made, fired or not, it is very susceptible to breakage. Bringing this process into the public is unusual enough to motivate conversation from others.

C.O.W. enables me to interact with strangers and gather firsthand data as a participant/observer of what people respond to and need. The purpose is to draw people in by sharing my creative process and inviting them to make something with me. Working slowly in public, inviting passersby to ask questions and make something of their own enables myself, and others, to playfully disrupt daily schedules and cross established social boundaries. On site, I coach participants through exploring the material while I also share stories of my own experiences with ceramics. It is up to the participant to their level of involvement in my project. Some choose to sit down to make something; some stand nearby and talk to me while I work; and some simply watch without interacting. The purpose of C.O.W. is to explore alternative ways of exchange that validate the individual, their efforts, and their abilities and willingness to interact.

In planning for these events I use Abraham Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs in order to cultivate a safe atmosphere where people feel comfortable exposing themselves. The awkward, performative nature of C.O.W. is also playful, which builds in the security necessary for me to expose myself comfortably. Maslow’s theory accurately describes many realities of personal experiences and their priority or significance. He approaches psychology from a humanist perspective, focusing on the potential of an individual. This theory is fundamental for helping someone reach their full capacity—what Maslow refers to as the "self-actualizing person." Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs are the following:

1. **Physiological/Biological Needs**: oxygen, food, water, and a relatively constant body temperature
2. **Safety Needs**: security
3. **Needs of Love, Affection and Belongingness**
4. **Needs for Esteem**: needs for both self-esteem and for the esteem a person gets from others

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5. **Needs for Self-Actualization**: need to be and do that which the person was "born to do."\(^{29}\)

Using this psychological checklist helps demonstrates the cumulative needs that must be met before self-actualization is possible. Physiological and biological needs must be met before safety needs, safety needs before needs of love, affection and belongingness and so on. Accepting these limitations, I intentionally set up C.O.W. events in middle class, American neighborhoods, where physiological and biological needs are likely to be satisfied. This allows me to focus on the last three needs, creating an atmosphere where people can feel comfortable to open up and share with one another. The last three needs are less dependent on economic class. (I find multiple examples of upper or middle class people who don’t seem to have access to love, self-esteem, or self-actualization.) In these events I accept that it is unlikely (and potentially undesirable) for feelings of love to develop during such a short interaction. However I do experience how a smile, eye contact, and a general interest in other people, combined with a willingness to expose myself, allows me to connect to others on a deeper level, regardless of the brevity of exchange. I structure C.O.W. is an way that makes it possible for the participant to explore what it would be like to have a sense of security, belongingness, self-esteem, and the respect of others, all of which, together, lead to self-actualization. In return, I also find self-actualization in the process. This mode of working utilizes my compassion for others and my desire to create moments to build upon relationships. It connects me to people I would otherwise never meet. I experience what it is like to have a skill or knowledge that I can share with another person. I also learn about myself and experience how I can mediate interaction in public.

I openly recognize and admit that I am not a therapist and I see the inherent dangers in posing as one, however I naturally tend to follow a method similar to Carl Roger’s non-directive approach to therapy. His person-centered approach allows communication to flow unscripted between therapist and patient and educator and client and focuses on the needs of the individual rather than the needs of an organization. Rogers recognizes that humans have an underlying "actualizing tendency" which is assisted by phenomenological experiences.\(^{30}\) The way to enable these exchanges is by getting to know another person and finding our what their needs are, as opposed to going into a situation with another individual with preconceived expectations. This strategy is essential for eliminating a hierarchy that often surfaces within public art projects.

### 2.2 CHORUS: ALTERNATIVE ECONOMIES AND MODES OF EXCHANGE

C.O.W. purposely explores exchanges between strangers that occur outside of financial transactions. Financial transactions seem to be the primary way that people engage with others they don’t know. Within these interactions lies the assumption that someone wants something or is selling something. I remove the role of commerce in order to imply there is another valuable form of exchange at hand.

At one event, a woman came up to me directly and asked, “What’s the catch?” I told her it was free. She didn’t believe me at first, but once convinced, she advised me to post a sign saying, “FREE.” I do not intentionally highlight the "free" nature of my project for a number of reasons. One, it is out of respect to other vendors because I do not want to affect their business. Two, I also enjoy the idea of a reward revealing itself when a person talks to me. Three, I think that announcing it is “free” might change the nature of the exchange, from one that is personal and collaborative to one that might be taken advantage of with a scarcity mentality. It helps for aspects of the project to become evident over time. This allows participants to form their own understanding at their own pace.

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\(^{29}\) Maslow, 21.

Removing commerce can be interesting in commercial areas and places relatively free of commerce. In a park it is possible to find vendors selling ice cream, cookies, and tacos. A park can also be a place to be alone, to be reflective. People travel to parks alone or as part of a couple or group. I find that people are surprised by the idea that I want to invite them into what I am doing. It is sort of a sacred place, a place for pleasure. I hope to challenge people’s expectations of what might happen in public spaces in order to clarify my intention. I imagine people walk away, or look on with interest thinking, “What was the purpose of that?”

I am upfront with my motivations that drive C.O.W. though I realize at times it is important for people to come to this realization on their own terms. Realizing without being told makes the event feel more inclusive and personal. It is akin to being told a joke and getting the punch line, as opposed to having the punch line explained to you. When you come to the realization on your own terms you can feel like a significant, connected member of a larger group. I have always wanted there to be a spark, a moment where someone is surprised by an act, the gift of an object, an experience, a smile, an attentive listener.

2.3 ACT 2: THE SEEDPOD EXCHANGE EFFORT (S.E.E.)

A few months prior to communiPLAYtion I began hosting brunches at my home. During these events I enlisted the help of friends, colleagues, neighbors, and past C.O.W. participants to make small handheld objects out of clay that resembled abstracted seedpods and other shapes. The brunches were the first part of S.E.E., the Seedpod Exchange Effort. During these events conversation seemed to flow naturally amongst my peers in a way that I had not experienced. In the effort of contributing to a larger project, originality and competition seemed relatively unnecessary and participants seemed more excited about the success of the project as a whole.

Image 5 (left). Ceramic seedpods
Image 6 (right). Friends and colleagues taking part in a seedpod brunch

The goal of S.E.E. involved anonymously gifting hundreds of seedpods with the C.O.W. logo and web URL throughout various locations. Students and friends eagerly distributed them. People who found the seedpods could read about the project on the website and choose their desired level of involvement. The seedpods were intended to generate excitement and interest within the general public to participate in communiPLAYtion. Some were placed in public locations, while others were given directly to individuals.

The goal with the seedpods was to track the significance of intangible exchange amongst individuals beginning with a tangible object. The seedpod is the beginning of an openhearted gesture—to give a gift anonymously (even the seedpods that were gifted directly to someone were not given by the maker). The gift was an invitation to be a part of a communal project. The nature of gift exchange implies that the person who receives it will want or feel a need to reciprocate in some way. Instead of the gift being reciprocated to the giver, the website leads the seedpod-finder directions to track the seedpod, where and how they found it, and suggests the participant consider how they might extend an act of generosity in another direction, keeping the gift in cycle. The map is a visual record where participants can post comments and experiences. Over time the map will track appreciation, generosity, skills or insight gained related to the exchange.32

An important element of this body of work transparently utilizes marketing strategies. Marketing allows me to share these ideas and experiences with a broad, inclusive audience. Branding C.O.W. gives the projects greater visibility. I upload images to the C.O.W. website and post on Facebook and Twitter under the Clay on Wheels identity to keep past participants engaged. These sites are wikis which enable me to set permissions to monitor contributions and also allows users to edit the contents. These social networking sites also enable users to “share,” “like,” and “retweet” which can help spread the ideas beyond the limitations of a physically connected community.

Through posts on Facebook, this project also managed to draw attention from colleagues outside of Louisiana. Artists and students from Maine and Tennessee contributed over two-dozen seedpods. Another handful of artists continue to email me about ways they have included making seedpods and “seeding” their current locations. Various artists were excited to get involved in a project that would extend our studio practices in an outward gesture of gift-giving.

2.4 CHORUS: ENGAGING WITH OTHERS IN PUBLIC SPACES

Recent trends of DIY “Do-It-Yourself” culture reinvigorated the craft movement and also incorporate a political and social agenda. CommuniPLAYtion, C.O.W. and S.E.E. utilize similar methods in efforts towards democratizing public space. These public acts are referred to by Brian Holmes as “Do-It-

These and other similar art practices create a sense of community where the participants are the co-creators. One example is Diana Mars’ Any Wednesday, a small, underground dinner production where the food is free and various participants are invited. The idea is to remove the hierarchical roles between artist and viewer and create the opportunity to become a co-creator and a partner. In What We Want Is Free, Ted Purves describes various artists’ methodologies where “the management of such a project becomes a work of art.” These artists argue culture is something you make rather than something you buy. It is part of the larger “DIY” movement, which seeks to give everyone a right to speak, make, or participate in any other way.

Another subtle form of revolution that communiPLAYtion works towards is described in Michel de Certeau’s The Practice of Everyday Life. In this book he describes the power structure of the institution, the producer, and the consumer. He does not advise following established rules or revolting against them, but rather suggests the unpredictable, personal nature of the practices of everyday living. Simple individual activities operate within societal boundaries, however, their construction outside of the institution make them tactics as opposed to falling into the strategies predetermined by the capitalist system.

The subtle actions of working in clay with communiPLAYtion and C.O.W. create moments that humanize public space. Places where strangers normally do not converse with one another become open to dialogue through a creative act. Publicly accessible studios focus on social exchange and challenge basic assumptions of public space and capitalism. Creating an opportunity for participation is a way to give voice to individuals across all backgrounds. El Lissitsky believed that “the private property aspect of creativity must be destroyed; all are creators and there is no reason of any sort for this division into artists and non-artists.” Creating an equal platform is essential to C.O.W. and communiPLAYtion. Combined with S.E.E. these projects allow me to engage and draw attention to the skills, knowledge, and willingness to experiment already inherent in each participant. By freeing the participant to make something “artistic” it creates an opportunity to explore, to take risks, and try something new. Through careful observation and analysis, I illuminate the poignancy of the experience by revealing the values and skills each person brings to interaction. This open-ended creative act catalyzes self-empowerment.

While on-site I gather data with an audio recorder, a journal, and a camera, keeping track of the interpersonal exchanges that feel significant for me, or that I see happening amongst others. This data reminds me of the power within these interactions. For example, on one occasion a person originally denied the opportunity to make something, saying that he couldn’t make anything. After a little bit of encouraging, he made a nice, simple maquette of a four-legged animal. He was proud of his efforts and felt the desire to find his friend to show it to her. He seemed to have surprised himself.

### 2.5 ACT 3: communiPLAYtion: getting our hands dirty together

During communiPLAYtion: getting our hands dirty together, I invite a wide audience from Baton Rouge and greater Louisiana to transform Foster Gallery into a space that is more conducive to dialogue. I publicized the event through a large circuit of traditional marketing methods and also used the seedpods as a way to generate “buzz” and draw a larger crowd. The publicity effort also focused on communicating the interactive nature of the project, informing participants to dress casually so they would feel fewer inhibitions to get involved and also potentially plan to spend more time at the event.

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Upon entering the foyer of Foster Gallery, visitors are welcomed with a table of refreshments: a pot of hot coffee, hot water for tea, pitchers of cold water, iced tea and a small sampling of cookies. It is important that the space is warm and inviting so that participants feel welcome and eager to contribute.37

As visitors approach the gallery, they find the room is set up like a large workspace or living room. The floor is covered in sections of charcoal grey carpet—a grouping of three in the center of the room and underneath each of the three worktables. The carpet is meant to guide participants to work together in specified areas and also keep the floor safe from being wet and slippery.

Image 9. Installation overview of communiPLAYtion
Image 10. Installation detail of tools for communiPLAYtion

The worktables are sturdy: each built from two-by-fours and plywood, the bases of which are painted a bright, cherry red. The tabletops are covered in canvas. At the back center of the room the table is three feet-by-six feet and stands thirty-three inches above the ground; a comfortable working height for a variety of ages. Another table, taller in height, three feet by three feet and thirty-nine inches off the ground stands in the left hand, back corner of the room. These tables are built to accommodate a variety of different age levels, and generate interaction amongst participants. Beside each of the taller tables, rests one thousand pounds of wet paperclay, (two thousand pounds total) tidily packaged in boxes.

After entering the space, visitors find a canvas-covered bench close to the entrance, a few feet from the open space and carpeted floor in the center of the room. Underneath the bench are red Tupperware bins of disposable shoe booties. Guests are invited to take a seat and cover their shoes. On the other side of the bench is a cleaning station: a table covered in black tablecloth, with a bucket of clean water and a sponge for washing hands. There are clean white towels on this table and hanging from a hook above. The floor surrounding the cleaning station is covered in charcoal grey doormats to absorb any water that might drip from participant’s hands. This table also has hand sanitizer and wet wipes for participants to clean their hands. To the left of the cleaning station, five aprons hang from small brass hooks on the wall. These aprons, outfitted with the Clay on Wheels logo, are for anyone to wear in order to protect their clothes while they work.

37 Considering the location of Foster Gallery on LSU’s campus, many of the people who participate are students, teachers, or staff. They often come in during short breaks between classes. In order to compel them to stay longer, it helps to have coffee or food so that they can also utilize their break for lunch.
Image 11. Installation view of *communiPLAYtion*: a participant dries her hands at the cleaning station before leaving

Image 12. Installation view of *communiPLAYtion*

Moving to the back of the room, on the wall the title of the show *communiPLAYtion: getting our hands dirty together* is outlined with pencil, and along the wall seven pencils hang from strands of soft, red, fuzzy yarn. Participants are invited to write their names or draw within the letters. Over the course of the week the title emerges darker and more noticeable from the collective marks of each person. At the left corner of the room, the wall is covered in a four-by-eight-foot sheet of white pegboard, equipped with clay tools for shaping, cutting, carving and rolling out clay.

Image 13. Installation view of *communiPLAYtion* lettering
On the far left side of the gallery, the state of Louisiana is painted in a medium tone of grey on the wall with clear pushpins marking Lafayette, Baton Rouge, and New Orleans.

These three locations indicate the places where Clay on Wheels (C.O.W.), a precursor to communiPLAYtion, traveled. The items that people made during C.O.W. excursions over the past eighteen months are on display in front of the image of Louisiana. A deep purplish-red, fuzzy yarn connects the pots and sculptures to the locations where they were made.

Another bench covered in canvas stands in front of the pedestals, inviting guests to sit and watch other participants build on the carpeted area in the center of the room or watch a slideshow of images from previous C.O.W. and S.E.E. events. The television screen stands up against the wall, directly to the left of the entrance and in front of the carpeted space playing images of the bike cart on the road, set up at various locations, interacting with different people. As visitors leave, there is a small table with glazed, fired ceramic seedpods, made during S.E.E. along with C.O.W. stickers and small handouts describing the seedpod project and ways that people can participate. Visitors are encouraged to take any of the fired seedpods by the gallery exit as they leave. In return, I present the idea that they consider what it means to give a gift. I suggest ways they might extend to another person. The website printed and fired on the
seedpods directs participants to a map where they can upload photos from a cell phone or digital camera. Using built-in navigation devices within these cameras, collaborators can easily tag a location on the shared map within the Picasa Web Album “In Search of Ceramic Seed Pods!” simply by uploading their digital photo. In the comments section, participants are also prompted to write whether they found or ‘planted’ the seed. If participants found one, I ask them to comment on what it felt like to receive a gift anonymously. If they placed the pod for another person to find, I ask them to write about what it feels like to be on the giving end, potentially never knowing whether the gift was received or not. Is there a need for recognition? Is it fun to participate in a treasure hunt as an adult? Is there a need or desire to know who or if someone found the one they ‘planted’?

Over the course of the week, a video camera in the top left corner of room, records a snapshot of the room, about twice every minute when there is action. These images will later be compiled into a time-lapse film to document the sculptural development and the level of participation and interaction in the space.

For the majority of the week I work and stay in the gallery to interact with visitors. Friends, other art students, and volunteers work in the space when I cannot be there. There is no signage or instructions posted which compels visitors to ask each other what they are supposed to do. In a subtle way, it prompts a very simple interaction among visitors and other people in the gallery. This provides an entry point into a larger dialogue.

When I am in the gallery, I engage visitors casually in conversation. I spend a lot of time adjusting the lights, fine-tuning the layout, making coffee and restocking food, which gives me the opportunity to segue into saying “Hello” or starting conversation. I almost always find a way to reveal something about myself first—I tell a story or laugh at myself for any number of clumsy things that might happen. I give a handful of examples of techniques and ideas to jumpstart a direction to pursue without limiting what they make. I also describe things that make me feel comfortable and the thought process that I go through in determining what I make. While we work, I share stories or memories our conversation evokes and commonalities reveal themselves. I find that disclosing aspects of myself encourages participants to make something personal.

I’m interested in what makes other people feel at home or can help create a sense of belonging. I encourage them to use those influences to contribute to how we might build up an environment in this room together. As a starting point, I explain my goal to create a comforting and inviting space. I invite them to work with me or make something in response to the forms that already exist in the environment.
I encourage others to work in the pursuit of exploration without over-analyzing the quality of the finished product. The intention is to pursue material play and improvising with others in clay. I teach some participants basic principles of developing ideas and working in clay to make something of their own. One way I reinforce the idea of play is by not firing the objects that are made on site. I remind participants of this as they work, so they feel free to make whatever they want. After the closing of the event, all of the clay is broken down into small pieces to be slaked and reclaimed for another event.

There were moments during the exhibition when I explained this to people and their faces saddened a little. Then, as I told them about the reason behind re-using the clay, stating that the process can serve more people over and over again, they seemed excited again to be involved. Their focus shifted away from the individual object they made to the collective experience. One of the best barometers of this was a group of school children that came into the exhibition one day. The children worked for about an hour making figures and animals to compliment the evolving underwater themed landscape. Towards the end of their working time the students began to ask if they could take their objects with them. I explained to their chaperones that I had no problem if they took the clay with them, and also explained the potential mess that might occur getting the objects safely to their homes and over a long period of time. We explained to the students the issues at stake with transporting unfired material. I then described in greater detail the motivations behind the project and the opportunity to be a part of the larger sculpture that had already emerged in the center of the room. To my surprise, each of the students was thrilled to choose a location for their objects and did not seem concerned that they would not take the objects home with them. They were able to see the value in what they had just completed without emphasizing the preciousness of the object.

Other participants choose to watch or talk to me and other participants as we work, without making anything of their own. Potential participants choose a level of interaction and engagement suitable to their needs, desires, and personal level of comfort. CommuniPLAYtion addresses the need to be seen and heard which is evident in the writing facilitated by the Telling Room. The Telling Room is a non-profit writing center in Portland, Maine, which encourages developing the natural storytelling ability of children and young adults. Their mission statement asserts, “We believe that the power of creative expression can change our communities and prepare our youth for future success.” Research shows that participation in these activities improves academic standing, self-confidence, problem-solving skills, and critical thinking. Co-founder Michael Paterniti describes the motives behind The Telling Room: “We're big believers in the power of storytelling...If you tell me your story, and I tell you mine, we've already reached a higher level of intimacy in 10 minutes than we have with most people we meet on a daily basis.”

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One of the participants, Molly, writes “Thank you for everything you have done, from helping us with writing, but most importantly for listening... I am glad to say that what I wrote was from the heart, and that it meant the world for you to acknowledge that.” Reading these words reminds me how easy it is to underestimate the power of recognition.

One day, I met an older gentleman when I was set up on Chimes Street with C.O.W. He sat with me while I worked for a few hours and told me about the work he used to do at a grain silo in town. He reflected on aging and how it has changed his relationship with his wife. He seemed thankful to have someone to talk to and I was grateful that he was willing to generously open up to me. Suzi Gablik calls for an art “that is more empathetic and interactive and comes from a gentle, diffused mode of listening... a kind of art that cannot be fully realized through monologue. It can only come into its own dialogue, in open conversation in which one is obliged to listen and include other’s voices...” It is this willingness to reach out to someone, a stranger, that I find profoundly touching.

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41 Lacy, 36.
CHAPTER 3. ANALYSIS OF INTERACTIONS

Through orchestrating events such as communiPLAYtion, C.O.W. and S.E.E., I attempt to capture the intangible exchange of time, energy and the skills of individuals within a community though a tangible, visual system. I document these events with photos, video, a blog and maps. The photos illustrate the location, type of set-up used, and the nature of exchange between participants, particularly by capturing facial expressions and emotions. The video is a time-lapse film of the week-long installation. It shows the progression of the collaboration and the variety of groups that pass through the space. The film will also be used as a way to share the experience with a broader audience over the internet and in person through presentations. The blog and the Picasa Web album specify the exact locations of communiPLAYtion, C.O.W. and S.E.E. and enable other participants to share comments, reactions, and participate in future and on-going events. The documentation captures the essence of the exchange and provides a tangible means necessary to share with people outside of the immediate interaction. This physical evidence connects the local sense of community to a larger network of shared human experience though it cannot replace first-hand participation in these events. Lewis Hyde, author of The Gift, suggests the gift cannot be talked about in order to be shared, instead it must be felt: “it can be shown, it can be witnessed or revealed, it cannot be explained.”

The responsive turnout during communiPLAYtion supports the collective need for interaction. During communiPLAYtion visitors quickly engage as participants. On more than one occasion in Foster Gallery, participants called friends to collaborate. The feedback that I receive on site and afterwards is generally positive. However, utilizing a methodology similar to ethnography, where I take the role of participant observer, it is important for me to recognize the limitations and the effects of my own subjectivity. Inherently, there are places where it is important to recognize the failures within an anthropological study. It is important to be reflexive to see how my participation affects results. After various events setting up cow where many people are drinking, I learned to avoid future situation where alcohol is predominant.

In order to assess the success of communiPLAYtion and similar events, I take many factors into account. Often in the morning, the gallery is less active with fewer participants. As the day moves on, more collaborators arrive, some alone, some in small or medium sized groups. There are moments where my presence in the room is comforting to others, especially when they want specific hands-on advice in order to build something in particular. There are also times where it seems best to let couples work together with a little more privacy. I noticed more than one occasion when couples were getting to know each other on a first date.

The interaction changes based on whether the collaborator is introverted or extroverted, or if there is coffee present in the morning, or alcohol served during a reception. Amongst participants with varying levels of experience in clay there seemed to be an equal amount of those who approach the exercise without hesitation and those who seemed more reserved.

When I bring C.O.W. into the public I normally have to be set up for a few hours before anyone feels comfortable enough to talk to me. Often I will hear passersby asking each other questions about it, without actually making eye contact with me. One of the benefits of setting up communiPLAYtion in a gallery for a specified period of time, in comparison with the transitory nature of C.O.W., gives participants a schedule, which allows them to plan for adequate time on-site to make something. The adverse reaction of a gallery space is that interaction within a broader community may be limited, and the effect of spontaneity is diminished.

Before communiPLAYtion I emailed C.O.W participants to let them know they could pick up their work during the show. Only two of the participants from these events came to pick up their sculptures. On one hand, the minimal interest in the objects was concerning and almost frustrating to me. I carefully transported the objects from site to studio, in order to bisque, glaze, and glaze fire them. However, as my interactions with C.O.W. increased, and as I tried to stay on touch with participants I began to realize that

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42 Hyde, 366.
the objects lost importance after the event. There were also instances where I never received contact information from participants, often kids whose parents watched from afar. Other instances were also affected by inaccurate email addresses written. It is hard to discern how important these objects are given the experimental flaws.

Sometimes I discover the evidence for the impact of the interaction when I reconnect with the participant or someone who knows them. Multiple times one participant told me how much her partner enjoyed the experience. They took part in multiple S.E.E. events and collaborated during communiPLAYtion. Working with his hands reconnected him to an aspect of his personality that he does not access in daily activities.

During communiPLAYtion a colleague brought his painting students in for the duration of their class session. A few weeks after the show, one of his students approached me and told me that the experience opened up the dialogue amongst her classmates in a way unbeknownst to her after an entire semester of working in a classroom together.

On-site, one the most exciting things that happens is as people begin to touch the clay and see it respond, they begin to share reflections of how their experience reminds them of a memory or reveals some aspect of their personality. Kim Frohsin, a painter, describes a similar experience, “At times, there exists an unspoken ‘flow’, a sort of inspired ‘magic’, during the collaboration (artist and model); this element makes for sessions that are so rewarding, almost spiritual in intensity.” Working with one participant, a poet, we discussed various ways that we could add three-dimensional form to her words. Translating words and timing into clay abstractly was an interesting challenge to work through. In the end, she decided to build a bookshelf, a container to support her books of poems. On this shelf she inscribed a favorite quote by Mary Oliver, “What it is that you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?”

I also did not get much feedback from the seedpods distributed. There are many variables that could contribute to this: Because they are free, does that lower their value? Do people assume there is a problem with it or that it is worthless or trash? Do people question whether or not they should take them? A good example of this happened during communiPLAYtion, when a student brought a seedpod into the gallery that I ‘planted’ outside the day before. She was concerned that it had made it to the wrong place. She did not think it was for her to take, rather she imagined that it was an accident, and felt an urge to do was deemed appropriate.

The location on LSU campus also limits involvement primarily to students, faculty, and administrators. Between 8am and 4:40pm the gates to campus are also closed to outside traffic, and public parking spaces are difficult to find. Gallery hours also prevent members from the greater Baton Rouge community to come after work. Additionally, the gallery hours are somewhat sporadic due the scheduling restraints on student workers. I address these issues by keeping the gallery doors open after hours as long as I have someone else in the space with me. I sent out an email broadcast to the entire School of Art and I received a handful of responses from people (strangers, too) willing to help. These volunteers enabled me to keep the gallery open during time when I needed to be in class or teach.

CommuniPLAYtion, C.O.W. and S.E.E. show that the value of investigating the clay in order to communicate or express and idea or an emotion. The process involves self-reflection and creative problem solving, which can inform someone about how they make meaning and how their perceptions affect their social relations or consciousness of their self in the world. Self-reflection like this can be challenging and also liberating. One concern I have with the overly playful format of some of these events is that some adults assume they are for children only. When I described the public, performance-based interaction of my project to the husband of another art professor, he said, “That’s great! Kids really need these kind of experiences.” I responded with, “Adults need this too.” His face seemed surprised and his eyes brightened. It is fascinating that we identify something as important for someone else and overlook what might also benefit ourselves. At an event in New Orleans, one of the participants, a social worker, actually said to me, “Thank you so much for this. You just don’t get the chance to do things like

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this as an adult.” I can’t help but think that after working to help others as a career it might be hard to allow herself time to play, relax, and make mistakes.

There is also a rich exchange that adults can glean from children. During another event, a small girl I was working with exclaimed, “I’m finished and I’m proud of my work.” I recorded this on the back of one of her pieces. I find this willingness to profess excitement and pride is more rare as children get older.

In response to the psychological and physical distance that technology, commodities, and capitalism can create between individuals C.O.W., S.E.E. and communiPLAYtion illuminate the value of tactile processes. Tangible results are often more heavily valued than process in current Western society. CommuniPLAYtion dislodges the value placed on the final result, particularly by leaving the clay works unfired. The combined projects of C.O.W., S.E.E. and communiPLAYtion reveal the value of play in understanding ourselves and developing relationships with others. Material play, especially with soft, wet clay eases communication with strangers, colleagues, friends and family and allows me to draw attention to the skills, knowledge, and willingness-to-experiment already inherent in each participant and in myself. I find poignancy in the experience of revealing or reflecting the skills people possess.
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Vita

Brooke Cassady spent her entire childhood in the same house, wooded backyard, creek and town (Athens, Georgia)—the perfect refuge for a shy, young girl. She spent much of her time getting to know the plants and animals around her and immersed herself into making gifts and objects in all materials in order to communicate her love and gratitude towards others. After fourteen years her family pulled up its roots and headed to Louisville, Kentucky. The move engendered the searing pains of mourning and loss and she retreated into her shell but by the end of her first year in Louisville she burst forth, empowered by the transition to a freely structured yet rigorous learning environment.

After finishing high school in the fall of 1998, she deferred for one year from Boston University’s College of Engineering to “get the art out of her system.” During that time, she enrolled in a 2-month concentration-course at Penland School of Crafts in ceramics, simultaneously falling in love with the luscious, sensuous tactility of Grolleg porcelain and feeling defeated in centering the clay on the wheel. She searched for technical help in M.C. Richards book, Centering, yet continued struggling. One day in the studio, her thoughts relaxed, her hands stopped wrestling the clay and it centered itself. Her suspicion that hard work necessarily equates to progress, irrespective of self-reflection and intuition, was unraveled in that moment. The physicality of the clay confirmed her internal recognition.

Thirteen years later, her work focuses on the value of consciousness and perception that lies within physical processes, of which Richards eloquently wrote. She is eager to pursue and reflect on this practice in collaboration with the culturally fervent city of New Orleans.