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CHANGE & EXCHANGE: The Generative Systems Workshop Columbia College, Chicago

EDITOR'S NOTE: *Peter Thompson presented this talk at the recent "Electroworks" Symposium at the George Eastman House in Rochester on 11 November 1979. Thompson teaches book-making to his students through the use of copying machines.*

Earlier this year I worked with a woman who was doing a series of Haloid Xerox prints of feet. They were unlikely, but incredible. I suggested that she might want to protect them by making a portfolio case in the shape of a modified shoe-box. She tried to make it but was unable to move past the design state. She then pulled everyone she could into her project. I thought her inability was due to laziness and therefore asked people not to help her so that she could have the satisfaction of doing it totally on her own. No better. Finally she went over it with me step by step and it was then that I realized that she did not know how to read a ruler.

This kind of educational disability is not unknown at Columbia College, Chicago, where I direct the Generative Systems Workshop. Columbia College is a strange and marvelous place. It's an open admission, four-year liberal arts college specializing in the communications arts. Over fifty percent of its students are minority. The educational range at Columbia is enormous: within one workshop it is possible to have a person who is functionally illiterate and a person who is a student of the Talmud at the University of Chicago. The economic range is equally broad: last winter within one workshop a woman lost her mittens in December and was unable to buy another pair until February; within the same workshop was the wife of the condo king of Chicago. She flew to Israel or Aspen every third weekend for a three-day vacation. Columbia College is one of the only places I know in Chicago where this kind of merging of classes and diversity can take place.

The Generative Systems Workshop, of course, reflects this. One quarter of the workshops are advanced. Three quarters are beginning. The Workshop has been supported by Columbia's President, Mirron Alexandroff, and by the Photography and Art Departments and their past two Chairmen: Charles Traub and John Mulvany. We know that Generative Systems is an effective linking arena for advanced students. We are now most interested in finding out whether Generative Systems can work as a mental can-opener for people who have learning disabilities. If the Workshop does indeed function in the latter capacity, it could conceivably contribute its services as a part of a core program for incoming freshmen.

I am therefore engaged in thinking about Generative Systems in order to apply its strengths to beginning level stu-

dents. Such thinking deals with attributes of Generative Systems which tend to be overlooked by continually talking about it, as we have throughout this weekend, within the context of museum art. My questions about the uses of Generative Systems are therefore couched within the realities of the basic educational disabilities I experience in teaching of Generative Systems at Columbia College.

FEAR OF TEACHERS

The first and most basic disability is fear of teachers. To many students, teachers represent half of a polar pair: teacher/student, exploiter/exploited, powerful/powerless, master/slave, age/youth, active/passive. The teacher-student relationship is fundamentally narrative—that is, words, actions, techniques and purpose travel from the giving One to the receptive Other. While I strongly believe in the benefits of the discipline of apprenticeship, the narrative quality can easily become oppressive unless it is balanced by a vulnerability on the part of the teacher. Perhaps the most important way to evidence that vulnerability in the effort to break down the polarity is to engage overtly in an activity which Generative Systems tools encourage: to show the *process* of work from first faltering, feeble, frustrating efforts. . . to final faltering, feeble, frustrating efforts; to show that a work is not an immaculate conception—that it is conceived, birthed, raised, braces put on its teeth, argued with and humbly followed until it reaches its own highest level of maturity and can be let out into the world. I do not know of any place except within the context of an educational environment where this kind of knowledge-of-process can be shared. The transparency of this process is one of the strengths of the Generative Systems tools.

PASSIVITY

The second major educational disability is passivity. Many students tend to be present in body only and then attempt to shuck-and-jive their way verbally out of the consequences of not working. Many tend to have difficulty engaging, on all levels. They require that their work yield immediately encouraging results or interest is lost and they retreat to zero or to known formulae. In a letter, they can be characterized by the prefix "a". They tend to be a-sexual, a-moral, a-political—which suggests that for now they effectively reside outside the boundaries of a social life which requires a consciousness of otherness and the willingness to attempt discourse with that other.

How can Generative Systems tools be used as healing agents

for the disability of passivity? One quality often mentioned this weekend is the ability of the tools to give immediate results. Beyond the immediacy, the most important attribute is that the results be immediately *acceptable* to people who are visually educated by means of billboards and television. One of the main tenets of the billboard and television aesthetic is that an image must be sharp and unambiguous. That quality of Generative Systems tools must be stressed in order to hook beginning students into the process of their own work. The tools also tend to be addictive through the factor of their instant gratification, and therefore they encourage action. The observations of Jean Piaget indicate that action is the source of knowledge, and that knowledge builds upon itself. Reworking a problem forces greater insight and involvement. Each fresh return to a theme by means of a variation on it may integrate more information into an increasingly comprehensive understanding.

COMPREHENSIVE UNDERSTANDING

Comprehensive understanding is the third major educational disability: they do not have it. To think comprehensively and holistically—to reclaim, basically, the integrity of childhood—is a difficult undertaking. People who have learning disabilities carry the weight of continual failure, a failure most often in the linear and focussed thinking embodied in reading. To give them more of the same is a mistake. The ability of the Generative Systems tools to intermarry their products encourages associative thinking, something they tend to do well. Comprehensive understanding, however, requires both types of thinking: linear and associative—calculative and meditative. It requires not only both, but a balancing of both. It is fairly easy to do one or the other; what is hard is to embody in one's activities and thinking, the balancing. In the late Middle Ages the German word for "balance" was *die Wage*; it also meant "a risk"—and the meaning of that word has much to suggest in terms of comprehensive understanding. The risk inherent in balance can be put another way; it is easy to go crazy and stay put; what is not so easy is to go there and to come back—and then to keep the door open between the worlds.

BOOKMAKING

Practice in both linear and associative thinking in the Generative Systems Workshops takes the form of group and individual brainstorming, of making lists of the attributes of any idea or thing and combining those attributes into synthesized forms which can be acted upon in a series of successive steps, or generations, from the original idea. Beginning students learn how to generate ideas and how to fall out of love with those ideas, how to shift perspectives, how to be flexible. When they gain some facility, they are re-introduced to a specific form of linear thought that they have associated with fear and failure: books. I lead them to that form through the back door—*bookmaking*—and through that activity books and their embodiments of linear thought turn back into the magical things they were for us as kids. At this point in bookmaking, one more strength of the Generative Systems tools is felt: their speed. Exercises like the making of a book from scratch within a half-hour or the making of a collaborative book aid in providing a communal support base for the next educational disability: low self-valuation.

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The woman who could not read a ruler finally finished her project. She did not give it to me, but rather hid it inside a drawer in a copy camera. When I asked her why she had not completed the piece, she reluctantly went to the copy camera and dragged the portfolio out and presented it to me. She did not value her own efforts. *She* had never been shown that kind of care, so how could she transfer it to her *work*? For many people, work always stands outside them, as something alien, to which they have no relationship other than that contained under the terms of the word "assignment." Many would be most comfortable with prepackaged, predigested assignments. One of the things that militates against self-directed work, as opposed to an assignment which is given, is a lack of what John Keats called "negative capability": the capacity of being in doubt, of not knowing where a project is going but simply being faithful to the path which the project proposes. Students have lost that ability to be lost, to set themselves adrift in thought and action.

The translation of their often rich experiential knowledge into structures which can contain and adequately reflect the content—let alone not sabotage it completely—is often a very difficult undertaking because many students come from communities or home environments where individual needs are not only unrecognized but discouraged when recognized. This seems especially true for minority women. One dance student in Mary Dougherty's "Pier Group" program, for example, was forced by her father to withdraw from the program when she excelled to the point where she could dance solo because he saw that as a manifestation of vanity and a rising above community norms.

COLLECTIVE SUBJECTIVITY

The individualities of many students, consequently, reside within a *collective subjectivity*. The self-portrayals of many students are most often situated within the borders of collective social high points: prom pictures, portraits of themselves graduating from high school, pictures of themselves with their families within larger social contexts. They need these larger frameworks of support honored, while at the same time being exposed to the idea of the individual being of worth as such.

The Generative Systems tools, because of attributes I have

mentioned like speed and the ability to intermarry their products, can be used as support activities for both communal and individual effort within the freedom of a workshop atmosphere. Another attribute which enhances communal activity is that the tools move you quickly to the limits of your ideas and knowledge. You do not have the luxury of spending fifteen weeks learning how to expose a negative and to work a camera before you ask yourself what you are going to expose that negative to, and why. Those questions must be asked at the end of the second week with Generative Systems tools, because of their superficial ease of technical mastery. And this is what I have learned: that what I can do as an individual worker is to work to the borders of my own ignorance whose outlines, like negative space, are defined for me by the shape made by the limits of my knowledge. At that boundary I seek the help of others, either my living colleagues, or those who are dead-but-codified in an accessible form—in a book, or on film, or in sound. That is one strategy I attempt to use in leading people to read: that to open a book is potentially to make a friend; that a book is the evidence of a person who is not here; that they lie on shelves waiting to be approached.

RE & TRANS

The actions I am describing are inherent to Generative Systems tools and are condensed and contained in two prefixes: *re* and *trans*. All works prefaced by “re” describe human action—re-act, re-birth, re-collect, relate, recreate, remark, reform, rework—and they are all built on our fundamental ability to return to ourselves as the individual source of the action. Similarly, words prefaced by “trans”—translate, transport, transgress, transpose, transmit, transform—are built on our fundamental ability to understand and then to transcend a given situation. Translation is an act of flexibility. It is also, as the Italian proverb says, an act of betrayal, for it is a process which transcends the reality of a given moment by transforming it into that of another moment. The actions involved in using Generative Systems tools revolve around the combined nucleus of these two prefixes. Each individual tool is a language with its own richness and its own poverty. When the limits of an idea are reached in one language-tool, the concern embodied in the first expression is *translated* into another form by means of another language-tool. The *re*-working of the concern has been a constant. “Re” and “trans”—action by the individual and transcendence through understanding, together make up the soil for learning and growth.

GENERATIVE SYSTEMS TOOLS

At this point I will formulate a model for a Generative Systems Workshop by asking what the tools can best offer in terms of the educational disabilities I have mentioned. The answer is that the Workshop should be an artist-directed, peer-maintained work center which teaches what it means to choose a particular tool with which to communicate about the world—and how to transform the communication, and therefore the world, by changing the tools with which to represent it. It must encourage the attitude of loyalty to questions rather than to a particular technique of evidencing those questions. The questions asked must come from within the cultures of the students and be explored through street-

intelligible language in order to be grounded within their lives.

What I am suggesting is that Generative Systems tools are change agents and *that* is where their real strength lies. At this realization, then, I as an artist-teacher must look to the historical tradition of change in order to choose the most effective strategy to fit both my tools and my students. There are three basic strategies of change. The first is that of change through Coercion, which I can dismiss as out of the question both ethically and practically. The second strategy is that of change through Reason. This tradition comes out of the Enlightenment and is at the foundation of the liberalism of a Benjamin Franklin or a Horace Mann. It places great emphasis on linear, focussed thinking, and assumes that reasoned inquiry will banish our chains. Education according to this strategy is like creating an idea cafeteria with a very limited menu: we enter and, recognizing the reasoned balance of the fare, eat according to what we have been told are our needs—we are, of course, reasonable folk and follow directions. I find this second strategy of educational change not to be effective within my experience.

What I must do is to focus my thought on a third strategy for change: Decontamination and Re-education. At the foundation of this strategy is the believe that intelligence is in large measure a product of the interaction of the individual with larger social contexts. The liveliness of that interaction depends in large measure on the norms and institutions of the culture. This strategy recognizes the all-pervasiveness of the influence of cultural context and the difficulty—analogue to a fish discovering water—of our achieving enough distance to recognize that influence, let alone to do anything about it. Education according to this understanding involves changes in self-evaluation, language, techniques and human relationships, and not just build-ups in an information arsenal, or giving intellectual rationales for action. I have chosen this strategy.

Thompson then showed many slides of work done in the Generative Systems Workshops by beginning students. The incorporation of found objects, autobiographical events, communal books in which people embody their daily concerns, respect for materials, the cherishing of accidents, self-portrayals, were demonstrated.

After examining and thinking about a book by a gay man who lived in Joliet, Illinois, I wrote to myself . . . “The goal of the Workshop is the engagement and creative exploration, through the activity loosely called ‘art’, of the problems and opportunities of being human in order to develop some alternatives to repression, frustration, disengagement. The practice and study of art then broadens into a study of human values: endurance, generation and transformation through thinking, perceiving, problem solving.”

It was stupid of me to write that. It was stupid to think that if I am dealing with agents of change that all I have to do is to let people see their place and their plight and their lives will be made easier. If anything, if anything, their lives will be made *more* difficult.

Earlier this year a woman thanked me for the experiences the Generative Systems Workshop afforded her. It had, she said, made her life freer and more complicated than it was before coming to the Workshop. As she turned to go she added: “sometimes I curse you for it.” This statement brings

up the specter of educational success, along with the questionableness of teaching—that is, of one person presuming to act as an agent of change in another person's life. Given the remote possibility of striking a balance between assertive certainty and total insecurity in one's personal beliefs on the one hand, and between intimacy and distance in one's comportment as a teacher on the other, the statement points to the continuing liability of the artist-teacher to provide, without being cannibalized, both a formal forum and a personal support base for the kinds of complications implied by her statement. Effective teaching reveals and opens up the world of knowledge: it gives back in an organized way what is received in a disorganized way; it shows ways of seeing, and usually leaves unshown and unlit the questions of "how to continue" and "why do it". Dealing in those two questions is analogous to support sticks for potted plants—one's responsibilities as a nurseryman do not stop with planting the seeds of change.

—Peter Thompson

INTER-DADA 80 UPDATE

Inter-Dada 80, hosted by Mendo Dada, will bring together Dadaists from around the globe (we've had replies to previous mailings from Italy, Egypt, Switzerland, South America, Australia and even South Carolina), and is slated for May 1 - 4, 1980.

A schedule of events has been worked up, with a welcoming dinner on Thursday 1 May, while ensuing days will feature a Dada Danceathon, the world premiere of Kurt Schwitters' play, *Collision*, assorted films, slides and video, Buster Cleveland's inevitable Sound Poems, a spring fashion show presented by P.E.N., the on-going Mail-Art Show (theme of which is "Dada in the '80s", with more information to come), and an afternoon parade through the streets of Ukiah, led by Grand Marshall Cavellini (1914-2014) and featuring Anna Banana and her Banana Brigade. This will be followed by a Cavellini Look-Alike Contest. Other events, performances and displays will be added as they emerge from the minds of various participants. To keep posted on these and any other developments, requests for registration forms should be sent to Inter-Dada 80, 1451 Knob Hill Road, Ukiah, CA 95482.

Remember, Cavellini is coming. Documentation will be via video and a publication devoted to Inter-Dada 80. Artists in attendance will be invited to participate in producing the publication, so that means bring your tools, materials and images.

Space will be available for commercial enterprises for those who plan to sell (details on the registration form). Also, those who wish to perform should contact Inter-Dada as soon as possible, with appropriate information. The festival will close on 4 May, but a southbound caravan to Los Angeles will follow for Michael Mollett's Dada Sculpture to be held on 6 May. For details, write to Mollett at 1802 Washington Way, Venice, CA 90291.

Remember, for registration forms, information and other correspondence, new address for Inter-Dada 80 is 1451 Knob Hill Road, Ukiah, CA 95482.

INFO EXCHANGE

A letter to Dick Higgins is reprinted here:

Thank you very much indeed for your letter of the 3rd May. In fact your cutting is understating the Library situation insofar as we have not received new books and journals since 1974. If new writers and some presses would like to donate works to Makerere that would be very welcome indeed. I am not quite sure, however, whether your intention is to encourage donations to the main University Library or to the very small collection belonging to the Department of Literature. Either however will be very grateful to receive contributions. It is perhaps possible that they might be of more immediate significance in our departmental collection which is available more particularly to creative writers. (Dept. of Literature) /s/Mrs. M. Macpherson, Professor of Literature, Makerere University, P.O. Box 7062 Kampala, Uganda.
Send Books!

The San Francisco Art Institute has an audio-tape collection of artists working in sound and performance, and visiting artist lectures. We are especially interested in artists that are producing audio-tapes as their art, and would like to add them to our collection. Also, we would like to correspond with others schools, museums, people, etc. who are collecting audio work. Please write to Charles T. Stephanian, Media Director, San Francisco Art Institute, 800 Chestnut St., San Francisco, CA 94133.

Chris Petteys collects books and exhibit catalogs on women artists, trying to build a good library to assist her in completing her *Dictionary of Women Artists*, but she also wants to contribute the library and her extensive card files and clipping files on individual artists to a library where women's studies are an important part of their academic program. Please also send articles on women artists (especially those born before 1900) to Chris Petteys, 309 Delmar St., Sterling, CO 80751.

Rimma & Valery Gerlovin are two Russian artists who now live in Vienna. They would very much like to hear from you and find out what you as artists are doing. Rimma makes objects, usually boxes in the form of cubes, which open to reveal further information inside, but also does play-poems on a wall. Valery Gerlovin makes objects, using bread, mechanical building sets, earth and toys. They recently had an exhibition in Vienna and from March 1980 they will be in the United States. Write to them at Obere Donaust. 101-2-9, Wien 1020, Austria.

The Editor of Umbrella collects not only objects, postcards, clippings, and actual umbrellas, but also collects buttons—usually buttons that refer to art, publishing, books and that are not for sale except by a non-profit organization. If you have buttons that refer to art, books, publishing, etc., please send them along. I have buttons to exchange as well.