

## **An Aesthetics of Play - or, How to Appreciate Interactive Fun <sup>1</sup> by Tobey Crockett**

In order to understand the intersection of art history, the digital and the experience of 'fun', I start with several assumptions, the first of which is that that which makes the digital distinct from all that has come before it is its interactivity. And not just interactivity in a blanket sense, but only in particular aspects – for I don't believe that human interaction with a computer interface in and of itself constitutes the most interesting aspects of interactivity. In this rejection of HCI, I depart from many theorists of the virtual. Instead, I am interested in how people use interactivity to interact with one another.

In order to do this, I have settled on a small and apparently inconsequential area of interactive exploration, which are the free form, non-narrative structures of real time 3D virtual worlds. From my examination of these worlds, I have arrived at some conclusions which I believe hold interest for the study of interactivity in general, with broader implications for a number of other areas, and art history in particular. I propose an 'aesthetics of play and empathy' can enable us to evaluate the merits of interactive works with fresh eyes, allowing us to discern what is unique about digital media and empowering us to see anew what art historical antecedents we should draw upon to deepen our understanding of the emergent culture. <sup>2</sup> Inherent to these new aesthetic positions is an acknowledgment of the changing nature of subjectivity in a virtual context.

Located at the hermetic cross roads of global culture, interactive works require a combinatory approach, blending an appreciation for the "story of art" in historical terms, while holding space for the experience of the art in aesthetic terms. <sup>3</sup> Several key assumptions which have typically characterized Western art history undergo radical transformation in encountering the trickster-ish realms of the virtual and the interactive. Chief among these is a shifting sense of authorship and audience, notions of originality and the inviolability of a unique work, and tensions concerning the divide between the popular and the rare.

Improvisation, collage, appropriation, imitation, pastiche, hacking, decoding and cut and paste would all appear to be kissing cousins whose precise valuation in relation to one another is in flux depending on the historical moment. The challenges to originality and mastery which these terms carry with them in a virtual context is directly bonded to the concept of the author, a subject whose authority is entirely up for grabs not only philosophically, but now pragmatically as well. While the arguments concerning the fallibility of the contemporary author drawn from Foucault and Barthes are well rehearsed, the virtual subject is still being parsed for clues.

I would like to suggest that there is a foundational reason that a new understanding of the creative subject is required in the virtual. In 3D virtual spaces, that is those spaces which tend to be the catchall baseline for the notion of the "interactive", the very nature of space is fundamentally shifted from vacuum to calculus. Special effects techniques and CGI such as the "bullet time" special effects of *The Matrix*, among many other films,

demonstrate that each point in space is now literally able to report a point of view, bringing us relevant information from its embedded position. There is no longer such a thing as an unaccounted point. Consequently, every point is granted voice and agency – I call this the *camera* as camera phenomenon: the space (*camera*) becomes an accumulated zone of authorship and agency, and the traditional subject disappears altogether.

“...Conceptions of space and conceptions of self mirror one another,” writes Margaret Wertheim in her wonderful book *The Pearly Gates of Cyberspace: A History of Space from Dante to the Internet*. We are, as she says, “the products of our spatial schemes”.<sup>4</sup> Wertheim traces an intellectual history of space and allows us to see the ebb and flow, the push-me pull-you of matter and vacuum as it shifts through the ages. While in Aristotle’s day there was no such thing as emptiness, by the late eras of the twentieth century there was, in mathematical terms, almost no such thing as actual matter – all was space. Now cyberspace has challenged this in profound ways.

The POV which we see on the screen is not so much a floating eye which pushes its way ahead, like a foreign object slicing through water, or like an explorer claiming new grounds, but rather it is more like an Olympic torch, being passed forward from point to point and casting light as it is advanced passively from pixel to pixel. This is a vastly different notion than that of the forceful apparatus, the phallic camera, penetrating and possessing space like a Cartesian extension of the Western mind; rather the shared perspective of the integrated communal authority is passed around for unique input valued from each point for the special but momentary insight that contribution offers. This pixilation of space revels in multiplicity, offering an utterly different model of seeing, occupying space and of sharing power.

Given that the foundation of the space is thus shifted so profoundly in a virtual context, it is now clear why the subject and subsequent notion of author must also shift. Traditional conceptions of the author/artist as a lone maverick give way as a new type of authorship emerges; in such circumstances authorship now tends towards the improvisational and carnivalesque. There is an aesthetic of *play*, an active stance in which the baton of agency is tossed between participants, interactive contributors and witnesses whose alternation of roles is so fluid as to confound previous terms such as audience or viewer, words which are inappropriate for describing interactive pleasures.

The aesthetic urge towards play has been underestimated throughout art history in the Western tradition, lost in issues surrounding decoration, the canon, quality, and the Romantic emphases on genius, originality and the ‘shock of the new’. Residual burdens left in the aftermath of the dismantling of the Enlightenment, these issues are partially still in place due to the kinds of economic forces governing the fine art market. Just the same, our cultural model is changing and requires fresh thinking about what is at stake in terms of intellectual property, aesthetic values, the granting of permission to those who would express themselves, the nurturance of disparate voices and the global distribution of a mass of *individual* communications in contrast to a standardized message imposed via broadcast from on high. ‘Fun’ should be an important part of this new thinking.

I see clues to ‘fun’ in 3D virtual worlds. Perhaps one of the reasons it has been difficult for some theorists to appreciate the free form noodling of virtual worlds is the oft repeated critique that such spaces are boring, underwhelming, under populated or simply don’t look like much. To quote Gertrude Stein, “there is no there there”.<sup>5</sup> These questions of ‘quality’ are partially based on a fixation with realism as the determining factor in persuasiveness for visual representation, even in a virtual setting. Art historically, such positions are aligned with an impulse towards realism which is indebted to the era of Academic paintings, a stronghold of visual representation and the ‘canon’ just prior to the advent of Impressionism, Modernism and other forms of abstraction. If we are to understand interactive fun, we need to find the progressive, imaginative and creative element in the virtual, and it does not hinge on realism.<sup>6</sup>

Further complicating the ‘fun’ problem is that, until recent years, subjective accounts of pleasure have been denied any parlance in so called serious intellectual endeavors. However, various branches of critical theory including feminism, postcolonialism, and deconstruction have rehabilitated a conversation revolving around the area of subjective pleasure. For example, Donna Haraway offers tools by which to appreciate the ‘situated knowledges’ of the individual,<sup>7</sup> while Carol Gilligan traces the journey of love in the history of psychoanalysis, suggesting a re-embrace of pleasure as an antidote to patriarchy.<sup>8</sup> These and other critical theory topics can do much to open the door to ‘fun’.

Recalling the *camera* as camera conditions of distributed voice and agency, it would be useful to have models of subjectivity other than that of the Western tradition with which to engage the playful artistic endeavors already emerging from subjects facing groundedness and embodiedness in an entirely new context. There are so many options to be drawn from a diversity of cultures and time periods, that I will touch only on a few here, but the problem is an interesting one for art history and the question should provoke a wealth of ideas on the topic of experiential aesthetics newly cast in the realm of the virtual and interactive.

For instance, in the Indian traditions surrounding the multivalent terms *rasa* and *lila* we can find some new ways to think of interactive fun: *rasa* conveys a form of aesthetic rapture enjoyed by the experiencers of ritual performance, while *lila* is the divine play which inspires the feeling of *rasa*.<sup>9</sup> In sacred Vedic texts, the interplay between *rasa* and *lila* could hardly be more profound, and yet we can borrow from this special relationship of experience and play as a metaphor for the engagement which takes place in a similarly otherworldly context, that is, virtual worlds out of place and time, inhabited by avatars and authored by a world builder, whether acting as a team or individual. Embodiment, embeddedness, the nature of reality and the role of consciousness are conceptually available in the *rasa-lila* metaphor. There are a plethora of non-Western traditions which have much to offer us as we search for a new aesthetic context for interactive works.

In order to see which moments in the panoply of art history might be of some service in understanding interactive ‘fun’, it is of course necessary to flesh out what we mean by the term ‘fun’. First and foremost, fun can not be reductively conceptualized as the same for all users; efforts to essentialize, universalize or totalize fun and play need to be avoided.

One might nonetheless wonder if there is a cognitive, psychological or physiological basis for fun which is worth pursuing. Indeed, clues can be found in the work of Abraham Maslow and Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, psychologists who describe a state of fusion between the subject's awareness of themselves and their experience. Their concepts, peak experiences and flow respectively, point to certain positive psychological states which certainly qualify as indebted to 'fun'.

Maslow describes peak experiences as characterizing certain high point moments for mature, self-actualized, healthy individuals engaged in temporary behaviors such as being in love, attuning to nature, achieving mystical, oceanic or orgasmic states, and certain forms of athletic, intellectual, creative or aesthetic fulfillment. These experiences stimulate "greater creativity, spontaneity, expressiveness and idiosyncrasy". Maslow writes that a person in a peak experience state has a heightened form of cognition, and that this cognition is characterized by a greater sense of integration and harmony with the surrounding environment than at other times. At the peak moments, experiencers are "less split between an experiencing-self and an observing-self".<sup>10</sup> Peak experiences as observed by Maslow function as a kind of antidote to fragmentation and evoke a sense of transpersonal integration, a description which certainly seems applicable to the *camera* as camera subject I propose.

Csikszentmihalyi describes his now famous ideas about 'flow' in his 1975 book, "Beyond Boredom and Anxiety: Experiencing Flow in Work and Play". Flow is a state in which things are going well for the subject; there is a quality of total involvement, no boredom, no anxiety – the subject's skills are a perfect match for the challenges at hand. Play, creativity, and problem solving are all candidates for exceptional experiences of flow. Csikszentmihalyi acknowledges Maslow's peak experiences as being related to flow, though he characterizes them as being more akin to transcendence or spirituality than is flow. Flow is also not focused so much on the end results but rather more on a sense of fulfillment and process. Csikszentmihalyi writes that, "the clearest sign of flow is the merging of action and awareness. A person in flow has no dualistic perspective: he is aware of his actions but not of the awareness itself."<sup>11</sup> As with the work of Maslow, the merging of self and circumstance has some relevance to the emerging virtual subject in general, but especially for a virtual subject immersed in a virtual context, as are game players, visitors to virtual worlds, chat room users and file sharers, just to cite a few examples.<sup>12</sup>

In addition to an expanded subjectivity, both researchers describe a creative problem solving element as being characteristic of the special 'peak' or 'flow' states which tell us something about a basic notion of 'fun'. This problem solving and pattern detection activity is central to the 'cut and paste' mode of interactive fun which I discern as operative in a virtual context. One of the key aspects of the ability to digitally author texts is our newfound capacity to either mix, match, lift or re-enact texts, sounds and images with a standard of production values which far eclipse previous efforts at simulating 'professional' art forms. While the simultaneous critique/celebration inherent in imitating mass media is not new, (one need only think of Andy Warhol), the means of distribution and the relative 'professionalism' of the results are.

Such imitation or simulation hinges on the ability to accurately reproduce the patterns, standards and hallmarks of extant media forms, but the creative aspect which takes such productions past mere imitation and into a new form of creativity requires a facility with rules and rule breaking, improvisation and fun. What is ‘fun’ here is a process of cognitive sorting which is not so coincidentally also of interest to the fields of A.I., game theory, cybernetics and cognitive science. Enabling users to be self expressive by offering them modules of content and tools for assembly is the beginning of understanding interactive fun. Areas which have attracted my attention include quilts, silk weaving technologies, autobiographical accounts and cookbooks, crafts, collage, re-mixing, sampling, rap, hip hop, and fan productions of all sorts.

For many of these quasi-marginalized arts, the re-purposing of given elements – whether materials or tools – is a critical step in the formation of new cultural productions. Examples include African textile coding in the diaspora of the antebellum South and the evolution of rap and hip hop, the rise of chromolithography and the Victorian scrapbook, and today’s virtual worlds such as the Sims, with their online marketplace of household objects and virtual furnishings for sale in the electronic agora.<sup>13</sup> What links these productions is their role as examples of skilled handicrafts in a household setting, more often than not by women and more often than not utilizing modular elements which are re-combined into complex productions. Such overlooked productions tend to lurk at the fringes of new technologies.

The complex manner in which production values influence ordinary cultural productions by lay users, efforts which in turn influence the changing standards of production values in products intended for mass distribution, is certainly manifest in the cultural phenomena of dj’s, sampling, re-mixing, blogging, vlogging and podcasting. In other words, art imitating life imitating art becomes a Moebius strip of cultural production now widely available in a medium which is a mass of *individual* media producers; this is in contradistinction to the earlier one-way broadcast mode which is being simultaneously celebrated and critiqued in contemporary productions. Art historians know it is not necessarily the case that the effort at imitation is a conscious one, for often the zeitgeist appears to take over and a sudden rush to a particular trope just becomes common place.

A fascinating example of this can be found in a comparison of the work of Mike Kelley and so-called “primitive” craft items by non-professional artists on EBay. Mike Kelley critiques the art world by introducing ‘crafty’ aesthetics and a fictitious biography to go with it.<sup>14</sup> At the same time, influences of Martha Stewart, a greater nostalgia for ‘simpler times’, a rise in internet access and a down turn in the economy produce a move towards greater crafting in general, and eventually, an apparently strong crafter’s economy on EBay. Looking now at objects described by their makers as “primitive/grungy” in the crafts category, the association with Kelley and others whose work centers on the abject is inescapable. While it is likely that women who see their work as a loving and creative act would be appalled by such a comparison, the rise in an appreciation for the “grungy, grubby” aesthetics they embrace is certainly influenced by the emergence of a critique of the abject in the fine art world. At least, pace Horkheimer

and Adorno, some women appear to be making sufficient inroads in a craft economy on EBay to perhaps find a way out of their usual circumstances.<sup>15</sup>

Everyday objects made by women utilizing modular elements which are re-combined into complex productions are frequently dismissed or undervalued – one need only think of Loos’ famous injunction against decoration, “Ornament is a crime”.<sup>16</sup> Yet these productions seem to be part of an advanced wave of resistance and co-option of tools such described by Michel de Certeau in his book *The Practice of Everyday Life*.<sup>17</sup> In his observations of everyday resistance in the hands of the ordinary person, he discusses layers of production, that is the initial reproduction of an image and the secondary production of its manipulation, reflected in terms and uses such as ‘bricolage’ and an ‘art of combination’, which strikes me as very digital in its potential applications today.

This prompts an interesting parallel to the fifty years of the Victorian era bracketed by the invention of chromolithography in 1838 and the subsequent opening of the first advertising agency in 1841 on one end, and the explicit targeting of the American woman as a consumer in a 1891 on the other.<sup>18</sup> Interestingly for students of ‘fun’, the notions of childhood play and the subsequent commercialization of girlhood also arise during this time.<sup>19</sup> Linked to the arrival of inexpensive four color printing, Victorian handicrafts explode upon the scene, accommodating the very first wave of advertising and consumerist imagery which constitute a new kind of popular culture. There is a similar surge in self made media productions in today’s digital techniques and tools in the hands of ordinary lay people newly enabled to create with a level of technical expertise hitherto reserved for the professional. The quaint and often obsessive productions of quilts made from advertising silks, decoupage, scrapbooks, hand painted china, elaborately decorated cuisine, and extraordinary hats which characterized the highly feminized cultural productions bridging the Victorian and Progressive eras is being re-deployed today in the digital era, almost verbatim.

Today, it easy to see how a quilt might be a metaphor for digital technologies: made from pieces of other productions, humble in origin, overlooked and yet highly functional as well as beloved, a cut and paste or assemblage approach to object making and media presentations abounds. A casual reference and picture of African American strip quilts started my exploration of this medium. Strip quilts closely resemble African *kente* cloth which is woven on small hand looms in narrow bands and then sewn together to make a larger piece of cloth. Ringing like a description of digital assemblage to my ears, I was curious as to whether an historic connection could and should be made between these fabric forms and today’s digital tropes. Indeed, it appears that the fragmentary, disconnected nature of digital assemblage may well have part of its historical roots in the various charm-making techniques used by regionally identified groups in Africa, contributors to a rich Afro-American textile tradition.<sup>20</sup> The strung together structures of African textiles and the related patchwork forms of quilting tend to characterize many different cultural productions which are most definitely now digital in their articulation, including the verbal virtuosity and repetition of rap, hip hop and many dj re-mixes.

One of the main roles of imaginative play is to allow us to discern our self-generated position in relation to the reality which we perceive around us.<sup>21</sup> It is in artistic self-expressions, problem solving and pattern finding that we are most inclined to explore these operations. One way that we do this is by imitating and appropriating the mass media forms with which we are relentlessly inundated in this media and advertising driven culture, and therefore the ultimate use of cut and paste technologies seems to me to be present in the so called ‘fan’ productions. Fan productions are often dismissed, when they are in fact crucial to the economy of play which characterizes interactive spaces, and often lead to the next generation of culturally acclaimed products which sustain the “culture industry”. An adherence to rigid aesthetic and strictly formal concerns can prevent one from seeing the merits of such fan productions, instead seeing them as mere imitation, or purely derivative – all of which misses the point completely. Allowing for an expanded definition of authorship allows us to embrace the creativity and ponder the potential subversion of the status quo which such fan productions suggest.

Such productions have given voice to the most resistant and subversive elements in contemporary popular culture. In a reversal of elitist and commercial expectations, the overlooked material cultures of housewives and the peer to peer intellectual property “pirating” of fan productions are precisely the places where an emerging new aesthetic related to interactivity can best be discerned. I see virtual worlds as plastic artistic spaces in which users can self-express their interests, share files and customize their virtual environments and personae much as they do in the contexts of scrapbooking, crafting, altered books, artists trading cards, journaling, storytelling, blogging, vlogging, podcasting and the vast multitude of fan phenomena, such as fanzines, fan films and the new form of fan edits.

I do believe that digital technologies give us permission to create and express ourselves as never before, and I hope more and more people will continue to do so. Expressiveness deserves recognition, and should not be castigated for the benefit of outdated claims to ‘quality’. Enabling users to be self expressive by offering them modules of content and tools for assembly is key. I would like to suggest is that it is possible to appreciate intellectual property not for its unique aspect as a possession of a single user, but rather for its utility to an entire culture. This is the foundation of the commons approach to content and it merits some critical engagement.<sup>22</sup> Length prohibits offering a global survey at this juncture, but suffice it to say that many cultures take such an approach and that art historians engaging with interactive materials would be well served by an exploration of these values.

“Holding space”, a term derived from ecstatic and trance dance ritual, takes on new meaning when that space is full of a new *camera* as camera subjectivity enabled by technology.<sup>23</sup> In bringing together the technological with the multiple, it is worth recalling that it is the absence of a westernized subject which anchors the crucially different perspective in many non-Western traditions. Perhaps we can find a role for the *camera* as camera subject which does not essentialize, exclude nor ventriloquize, but which instead ‘holds space’ for emergent new voices. Each of the new points in the

*camera* as camera paradigm has a story to tell. It is the act of facilitating and listening to these stories which opens the doors to interactive fun.

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<sup>1</sup> This paper was presented at the REFRESH conference, First International Conference on the Media Arts, Sciences and Technologies held at the Banff Center sept 29-oct 4 2005 and co sponsored by the Banff New Media Institute, the Database of Virtual Art and Leonardo/ISAST.

<sup>2</sup> Crockett, Tobey. "Building a Bridge to the Aesthetic Experience: Artistic Virtual Environments and Other Interactive Digital Art" Intelligent Agent. Volume 5, number 1,2. Summer 2005. ve.crockett.01-04. <[http://www.intelligentagent.com/archive/Vol5\\_No1\\_ave\\_crockett.htm](http://www.intelligentagent.com/archive/Vol5_No1_ave_crockett.htm) >

<sup>3</sup> For an expanded look at what Hermes, the perennial Greek Trickster has to do with the interactive, one could find no better exhortation of the thieving god of commerce, communications and inventiveness than Erik Davis' book, Techgnosis. Davis, Erik. Techgnosis: Myth, Magic and Mysticism In The Age of Information. Random House. New York. 1998.

<sup>4</sup> Wertheim, Margaret. The Pearly Gates of Cyberspace: A History of Space from Dante to the Internet . W.W. Norton & Co .New York. 1999. p. 308

<sup>5</sup> Stein, Gertrude. Everybody's Autobiography (1937; Berkeley, CA, : Exact Change, 1993.) Stein's famous quote about her birthplace is, "The trouble with Oakland is that when you get there, there isn't any there there."

<sup>6</sup> Crockett ve.crockett.02. I refutes the need for realism in virtual worlds, citing the CyberForum experiences.

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- <sup>7</sup> Haraway, Donna. "The Promise of Monsters: A Regenerative Politics for Inappropriate/d Others" Lawrence Grossberg et alia eds, *Cultural Studies*, Routledge NY 1992. pages 295-337.
- <sup>8</sup> Carol Gilligan. *The Birth of Pleasure*. Alfred Knopf. New York, 2002.
- <sup>9</sup> Tripurari, Swami B.V., *Aesthetic Vedanta: The Sacred Path of Passionate Love*. Mandala Publishing Group. Eugene, OR. 1998. p. 20-25
- <sup>10</sup> Maslow, Abraham. *Toward a Psychology of Being*. John Wiley & Sons, New York. 1968 p. 116.
- <sup>11</sup> Csikszentmihalyi, Mihalyi. *Beyond Boredom and Anxiety: Experiencing Flow in Work and Play*. Jossey-Bass Publishers, San Francisco. 1975.
- <sup>12</sup> Parenthetically, I want to add that these descriptions of a subject embedded in a context which informs its subjectivity can not help but remind one of similar issues raised by AI. I am thinking most particularly of the work by Varela, Thompson and Rosch. Varela, Francisco J., Thompson, Evan T. and Rosch, Eleanor. *The Embodied Mind: Cognitive Science and Human Experience*. MIT Press, Cambridge, MA. 1991.
- <sup>13</sup> Will Wright speaks often and eloquently about the importance of player-generated content and fan productions. See Celia Pearce's interview with Will Wright. Pearce, Celia. "Sims, BattleBots, Cellular Automata God and *Go*" *Games Studies* 2.1 (2002) < <http://www.gamestudies.org/0102/pearce/> >
- <sup>14</sup> Kelley, Mike, with John C. Welchman, Isabelle Graw and Anthony Vidler. *Mike Kelley*. Phaidon. London. 1999. I am especially interested in the Lumpenprole piece from 1991, in which Kelley arranges a grid of stuffed animals under an afghan blanket. P. 127. Coincidentally, this significantly recalls the *camera* as camera notion of assorted subject/objects in a unified field.
- <sup>15</sup> Horkheimer, Max and Adorno, Theodor W. *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*. Stanford University Press. Stanford. 2002. I realize that Horkheimer and Adorno would likely see the eBay crafters as examples of a "compulsive imitation by consumers", victims of the culture industry, but it is hard to say exactly how one should apply their text in a web based economy. There may yet be signs of hope on the horizon.
- <sup>16</sup> Loos, Adolf. "Ornament Is A Crime". *Ornament and Crime: Selected Essays*. Ariadne Press. CA 1997.
- <sup>17</sup> Certeau, Michel de. *The Practice of Everyday Life*. (volume 1) University of California Press, Berkeley. 1984. Certeau offers an antidote of sorts to the bitterness of Horkheimer and Adorno.
- <sup>18</sup> The first advertising agency in America was set up by Volney Palmer in Philadelphia in 1841.
- <sup>19</sup> Formanek-Brunnel, Miriam. *Made to Play House: Dolls and the Commercialization of American Girlhood*. 1830-1930. The Johns Hopkins University Press. 1998.
- <sup>20</sup> Thompson, Robert Farris. *Flash of the Spirit*. Vintage Books. New York. 1984. p. 208-209.
- <sup>21</sup> See Winnicott, Donald W. *Playing and Reality* (Oxford, UK: Routledge Books, 1982) for a good overview of the reality construction which occurs during play in childhood development.
- <sup>22</sup> I wrote on the importance of the commons for the closing essay of the Hirsch Farm project. "Hirsch Farm Project Future". Hirsch Foundation et al. *The Compleat*. Hirsch Farm Project. Northbrook, IL. 1998.

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I would also refer readers to the nonprofit Creative Commons organization founded by Laurence Lessig and colleagues. Their outstanding work can be appreciated at < <http://creativecommons.org/> >

<sup>23</sup> The notion of “holding space” is drawn here from my personal experience with various teachers in the ecstatic or transformational dance movement. For more information on this practice, I suggest readers explore the work of Gabrielle Roth, such as her books Maps To Ecstasy or Sweat Your Prayers. An online article, “Dancing Is dreaming With Your Body” by dance therapist Eva Vigran can be found in the online archives of Berkeley’s Open Exchange. The url is < <http://www.openexchange.org/archives/AMJ04/vigran.html> >