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Photoshop, InDesign

My research for my paper mainly focused on the counterculture movements present in San Francisco during the late 60s. After learning about the political activism and community outreach these groups participated in I began to get lost in archives of underground newspapers from these groups around this time. Issues from papers like *The Great Speckled Bird* from Atlanta, to *The Digger Papers* from San Francisco. These papers gave artists and activists a voice and an outlet to spread their ideas and create community. As I was looking through these papers I realized the format of a large amount of these publications was similar to the modern day zine. A zine is a self published mini magazine a person or group of people make about a niche interest. I decided that I would make 3 zines under the same name to depict the communities from the past that I researched for my project, my present day community, and my hopes to encourage change for the future.

# Counter Culture Communities Fight Isolation



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*Writers note: This paper addresses how the San Francisco Mime Troupe and its affiliated groups created communities founded upon radical social and political ideas during the 1960s. I also seek out to prove how counter cultural communities can be used to prevent harmful situations of social isolation. I will begin by outlining the political and social landscape of San Francisco during the late 1950s and early 1960s, when the SF Mime Troupe originally flourished. Outlining the history of the theater troupe transition to collective ownership, and their offshoot the Diggers and the ideas and projects they took on. I also examine the social movements and community outreach provided by these groups and compare them to contemporary outreach programs like community fridges.*

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“The population density, specialization, and cultural heterogeneity of modern urban life undermined community and family bonds, thereby producing isolation” (Parigi, Henson, 156)

“From the mid-1980s to the mid-2000s, the average size of Americans' immediate conversational network shrunk by a third and the number of people who reported having nobody to talk to tripled” (Parigi, Henson, 157).

“The stranger is someone who is embedded in a social environment but is not completely attached to it. The stranger is in a position of enjoying greater freedom but is also precluded from truly intimate relationships with others” (Parigi, Henson, 158).

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I began this project by looking into research done on feelings of isolation. The quotes above are from a paper called “Isolation in America” that examines how and why we experience isolation. I started here because as someone who grew up in a conservative household this feeling is one I know very well. There was always this part of me that felt disconnected from the community around me, like they were all in on a joke I did not get. When I was much younger these feelings of isolation seemed akin to seeing a mime stuck in an invisible box, unable to verbally ask for help, so I began researching mimes. My research led me to discover the deep history of the San Francisco Mime Troupe. The San Francisco Mime Troupe is an anti-capitalist and anti-establishment theater group formed by R. G. Davis in 1959 (Mason, 10). Though their name may make you picture them as a group of silly street mimes, their use of the word “mime” actually refers to the types of plays they write and produce rather than the performers themselves. Mime, in their case, refers to the term used in philosophy and literature “mimesis.” Mimesis is used to describe literature and theater that mirrors or represents something from the real world (Lawtoo, 308). Literature and philosophy experts claim that mimesis and reality, “not only mirror one another but also critically reflect” (Lawtoo). Plato, who feared chaos and unwieldy change, argued these spectacles of tragedy and comedy should be banned from cities as “actors who impersonate a given role on a theatrical stage have the mysterious power to affect and infect the souls of spectators, forming, informing, and transforming their psychic lives” (Lawtoo). In this sense his sentiments, and his field of philosophy, is not unlike San Francisco city officials in 1965. The summer of 1965 the Park Commission issued a permit to the SF Mime Troupe for 48 performances “on the condition that the production used no obscene words or gestures” (Mason, 11). Civil liberties lawyers attended a preview of the show and approved its contents, but after the troupe’s 3rd performance the commissioners revoked their permit claiming the group's play was

too scandalous. Despite having their permit revoked the troupe continued with their 4th scheduled performance, after explaining the permit situation to the crowd and introducing the show, Davis was arrested by police. This incident became the main inspiration for what the troupe referred to as “guerrilla theater”, essentially pop up performances that could easily move locations if authorities arrived to shut them down. After Davis’s arrest the Park Commission refused all of the troupe’s permit requests and even added restrictions to park performances. This led the American Civil Liberties Union to sue the Park Commission on behalf of the Mime Troupe for their unconstitutional laws. In July 1966, the troupe won the right to perform in parks uncensored. By winning this case the troupe set a precedent that allowed other theater companies to freely perform in parks across the country.

The San Francisco Mime Troupe and the essence of the organization was much more than a group of performers putting on shows in local parks. Members were required to read political theory and participate in group meetings to discuss (Mason, 14). Political activists within the troupe contributed to many causes such as leading marches, organizing ways of non-violent direct action, and even helping the formation of the Artist Liberation Front (21). Though the SF Mime Troupe continued to exemplify their mission “to teach, direct towards change, be an example of change” (Mason, 14) even winning a Tony award in 1987 for excellence in regional theatre (147), a number of members branched out in 1966 to form a new activist group calling themselves the Diggers (12).

The Diggers were one of the most influential groups that came from Mime Troupe during the 60s. The group served free food around the city, developed multiple “free stores” where people could get clothes and household items at no cost, provided free community services like child care, medical clinics, and even a recycling program (Duncan, 161). While much of the hippie

movement in the 60s centered around white middle-class dropouts, the Digger movement was a much more inclusive group (166). The Diggers had almost full support of the black community when they announced their plan to help house hundreds of thousands of “hippies” in San Francisco over the summer. Roy Ballard, the founder of the Black Man’s Free Store, was quoted as saying “if the Diggers do not receive the help they are asking for in advance, as far as the black community is concerned, there will be no riot this summer -- there will be war” (The Digger Archives). The group also had a good relationship with the Black Panthers, who were getting started in Oakland around the same time (Berg).

Hippie groups around this time period were largely disliked by lower middle class ethnic and racial groups- as large groups of hippies would move into the low income neighborhoods and increased crime rates tended to follow (Duncan, 166). These groups tended to consist of children from affluent white families who decided to join the movement for superficial reasons. They glamorized poverty and glorified drug use, their constant talk of the evils of money and consumerism was extremely performative as these groups neglected to organize community outreach to fix the problems they so often complained about. These groups were hated and attacked by Hell’s Angels and other gangs of the time (167). The Diggers operated differently than these groups, and their relationships with the local community and the Hell’s Angels reflected this. Because the Diggers worked so closely with the local community and the Hell’s Angels to provide free community services, the rate of violence in the Digger community was much lower than that of other hippie groups of the time (The Digger Archive).

Unfortunately, despite the distinct differences between the Diggers and the rest of the hippie movement, the city saw them as one in the same. They believed the Diggers to be dangerous to the city and status quo. Police shut down multiple free stores after searching them and finding

a small amounts of weed in their basements, police also raided two of their communal apartments and arrested any occupants without ID (The Digger Archive). More instances with police occurred, so many that the Diggers eventually sued the police for constant harassment. The lawsuit did not end up going anywhere but after the attempted legal suit San Francisco Police Chief Thomas Cahill increased patrols in Digger neighborhoods, as well as an increase in the number of surprise inspections from the fire department. Eventually the city's increased crackdown on the Diggers and their community operations forced the group to dissolve and go their separate ways after "Their last event was occupying the steps of city hall from the spring equinox to the summer solstice" (Berg, 6).

The Diggers and their free stores may not be around anymore but the spirit of their community lives on in other ways. Since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic community fridges have begun popping up all over the United States providing residents of low income neighborhoods and food deserts access to free groceries they may not be able to get at the local food bank, "The database Freedge, which maintains a map of community fridges around the world, displayed 12 fridges in the US in March 2020. Now, 160 fridges can be found across 28 states" (Oung). Community fridges are filled by volunteers in their communities and anyone and everyone is welcome to take whatever they want from the fridge free of charge, and a large chunk of what stocks the fridges is "excess food" from local grocery stores that would have otherwise been wasted. Similarly to the Diggers' free stores, not all reactions to these fridges have been positive. Though a majority of reactions are positive many organizers have to deal with pushback from business owners, landlords, and individuals who disagree with the idea that everyone should have access to these resources. The communities that keep these fridges operational share the same counter cultural values the Diggers were pointing towards all the way back in the late 60s. These

counter cultures allow communities to be formed with likeminded individuals rallied around shared values. The sense of belonging in these groups allows people who may feel isolated in their communities to fight against the isolating feelings outlined in Wellman's lost community hypothesis, while creating meaningful social change in their communities (Parigi).



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