

**Sandro Dernini**

**PLEXUS BLACK BOX**



**A MULTICULTURAL AESTHETIC INQUIRY INTO  
AN INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY BASED ART PROJECT**

Copyright © 2007  
Cover by Micaela Serino

*To my mother Rosa Sanfilippo,  
and  
to George Chaikin,  
Stelio Fiorenza,  
Paolo Maltese,  
Silvio Betti,  
Ciro Ciriaco,  
Giovanna Ducrot,  
Langouste MBow,  
Leonard Horowitz,  
Sarah Farley,  
Bruce Richard Nuggent,  
and  
to all other Plexus friends  
who are not anymore with us  
along this endless art journey through  
the Door of No Return of the House of the Slaves of Gorée,  
Senegal.*

## FOREWORD

To open Sandro Dernini's Plexus Black Box is to begin a voyage of discovery for those unfamiliar with Plexus International, the multicultural art project. As the new reader turns the pages and follows the history of 25 years of events, she will initially be struck by the diversity of participants: performance artists and physicists, jazz musicians and composers, dancers and philosophers, politicians and poets join others in an ebb and flow of global interaction. Yet a kind of unity of purpose becomes palpable. It is to challenge the separation of the artist from the community, resist the reduction of art to the Artworld, and to move beyond the limitations placed on aesthetic inquiry as an academic discipline. A collaboration of voices speaks to the need for a community-based artistic identity across ethnic and cultural lines. Appropriately enough, some of the first voices documented are those disaffected artists living in the Lower East Side ("Loisada") of New York City.

As entrepreneur, instigator, ring-master or spokesman, Sandro Dernini continues to organize these events "from the bottom up," leading often to confusion and conflict. The alternative, of course, is "top down" management hoping for order in the proceedings of a cultural institution, often at the expense of individual or group creativity. As Dr. Dernini, Ph.D., Sandro, amazingly places all the historical documents and chronology of Plexus activities in the Appendices, while justifying the concept of "artist-as-researcher" and fusing the strategies of phenomenological and post-modern approaches to cultural phenomena in the text. He then provides the reader with his own "close reading" of the Plexus Black Box, grounded in his own experiences as participant-observer. It could be argued that we are either outsiders or insiders with regard to the "same" historical events in our lives. Sandro Dernini somehow achieves both in this remarkable dissertation.

David W. Ecker  
Emeritus Professor of Art and Art Education, New York University  
I.S.A.L.T.A. (International Society for the Advancement of Living Traditions in Art)



## PREFACE

Through its quarter of century documentation, Plexus is providing a unique historical opportunity for artists outside the Artworld system to have access to an *independent* community-based artistic identification.

In this book, following the model of “the artist as researcher” outlined by David W. Ecker, I present a revised edition of my Ph.D. dissertation in art education: *A Multicultural Aesthetic Inquiry into “Plexus Black Box” an International Community-Based Art Project*, completed in 1997 at the School of Education of New York University.

It was related to a series of Plexus art events made, with no financial banking, in the ‘80s and mid ‘90s.

Plexus, in which I participated since its commencement in 1982, has until recently realized numerous experimental events, that are still an unexamined part of contemporary art history, that involved on some occasion hundreds of participants from all over the world, against “the slavery of art” and the disengagement of the artists from the community.

Linked to many emerging issues raised by contemporary artists from the so-called margins of the Artworld, the book is based on “insider” accounts of their experiences with Plexus.

By presenting “art” as a sustainable development resource for the community, Plexus has intentionally situated itself within a broader community-based heterogeneous social environment.

By positioning art in the experience and local knowledge of “insiders,” it strives to overcome the outworn notion of “autonomous art” by means of a more complex interdependent vision of art. By challenging the theoretical view that the “artistic identification” is conferred only by the Artworld, it claims a legitimacy also for a “community-based artistic identification.”

The assumption of my dissertation was that a more participatory understanding of community-based art experiences was commendable in developing local and global alternative strategies for reinforcement of mutual respect necessary to cohabit with

diversity. By linking the notion of 'art' -- as a culture-bound aesthetic experience-- to the concept of "well-being," my overall assumption was that a multicultural sustainable paradigm to enhance the quality of life in the community would emerge.

In publishing this book, my assumption is that the *Plexus Black Box's* creative process as a qualitative problem solving may be invaluable in the methodology of understanding how "to move in other categories" for the development of multicultural sustainable strategies.

After 25 years, in a contemporary art environment known for the brief duration of its art groups and movements, Plexus is still struggling toward its own future. Therefore, this book is my homage to its endless survival art journey.

Sandro Dernini

# CONTENTS

FOREWORD	by David W. Ecker	v
PREFACE		vi
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS		ix
CHAPTERS		
I	THE ORGANIZATION OF THE INQUIRY	1
	Introduction	1
	Need for the Inquiry	2
	Statement of the Problem	6
	Delimitations	7
	Definitions	7
	Method	9
II	STRATEGIES OF INTERPRETATION	19
	The Artist as Researcher	19
	Glossary	24
	Field Research	26
	Procedures of Interpretation	33
III	DOUBLE WRITING AND DOUBLE READING	38
	"Insider" Narratives	39
	Giancarlo Schiaffini	39
	Mitch Ross	41
	Lynne Kanter	42
	Willem Brugman	42
	Miguel Algarin	46
	Alfa Diallo	47
	Arturo Lindsay	49
	Butch Morris	50
	David Boyle	51
	Eve Vaterlaus	54
IV	HISTORICAL EMIC ACCOUNT BY THE ARTIST AS RESEARCHER	57
	The Narrative "in the First Person" by Plexus 23s	57
V	A CLOSE READING OF <i>PLEXUS BLACK BOX</i>	130
	A Strategic Survival by Art Withdrawing	136
	Repatriation of Art into the Community: <i>The Artist in the First Person</i>	140
	An Open Social Ritual Multi-Arts Form: <i>The Plexus Art Co-opera</i>	151
	Plexus Compressionist Art Process	160
	Against the Slavery of Art "Isms"	165
	Eating Art	170
	Well Being in the XXI Century	179
	Final Remarks	183
VI	RELATED LITERATURE	185
	Aesthetics, Hermeneutics and Deconstruction	185
	Artworld and Contemporary Changes	196

## APPENDICES

A	PLEXUS "INSIDER" TEXTS	207
	Aaron Barr	207
	Fabrizio Bertuccioli	208
	David Boyle	210
	Gaetano Brundu	211
	George Chaikin	214
	Sandro Dernini	215
	Antonello Dessi	223
	Stephen DiLauro	224
	Albert DiMartino	226
	David W. Ecker	227
	Frans Evers	228
	Leonard Horowitz	232
	Ray Kelly	234
	Arturo Lindsay	235
	Paolo Maltese	236
	Maria Pia Marsala	236
	Luigi Mazzarelli	237
	Assane MBaye	239
	Kre MBaye	241
	Franco Meloni	241
	Okechukwu E. Oditia	245
	Lorenzo Pace	246
	William Parker	247
	Frank Pio	249
	Rolando Politi	250
	Andrea Portas	252
	Josè Rodriguez	254
	Barnaby Ruhe	258
	Anna Saba	258
	Micaela Serino	258
	Frank Shifreen	259
	Youssof Traorè	260
B	PLEXUS HISTORICAL DOCUMENTS	261
C	CHRONOLOGY OF PLEXUS ACTIVITIES 1982-2006	266
	BIOGRAPHIC NOTE	283
	BIBLIOGRAPHY	284

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I desire to acknowledge my indebtedness to all copyright holders of the works that have been quoted in this book as well as of the photos, artworks and texts. I am grateful to them to have made possible the realization of this book and the continuation of the undertaken voyage.

I wish to express my gratitude to the members of my Dissertation Committee at the New York University: David W. Ecker, Angiola Churchill and John V. Gilbert. They carefully guided me in dealing with such a complexity of issues raised by the subject matter of the study.

I am grateful to David Ecker for his remarkable foreword that opens this book and to John Gilbert and Okechukwu Oditia for their blurbs reported in the back of the book.

I truly thank David Boyle and Lynne Kanter for their editing in 1997 as well as Maria Pia Marsala and Okechukwu Oditia for re-editing this edition. I would like to thank Micaela Serino for the book cover and her endless collaboration and Sebastian Comelli for his conceptual cleaning inputs.

I would like to acknowledge all Plexus "insiders" for their indispensable contributions and critical discussions on my Ph.D. inquiry, which shaped at the same time the dissertation and the history of Plexus. The survival artists' struggle in the community was our common motivational force.

I am aware that there are so many people, who did and do so much and with whom I shared the experience of Plexus, that I have not fully mentioned in the book, particularly those that have participated after the 1993's delimitation of my inquiry reported in this book. Therefore, I apologize for it and give them my commitment for a new *Plexus book*, reporting all missed participations and related credits.