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# Doorways to the Academy: Visual Self-Expression among Faculty Members in Academic Departments

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## **Doorways to the Academy: Visual Self-Expression among Faculty Members in Academic Departments**

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### **Abstract**

In this article, we seek to understand how faculty door displays can evolve into an elevated form of self expression rather than mundane decoration. Other research on this topic has linked the decoration of faculty doors to theories of personalization: the need to mark the territory as belonging to the owner and as a symbol of commitment to an institution. Our discussion, however, focuses less on the personal and more on the use of the door as a means of positioning oneself within the department, institution, and discipline. We find that faculty door displays encompass more than just matters of personal style but also touch on the larger concerns that the professor wishes to communicate to the academic public.

A walk through the hallway of any academic department can reveal much about its culture (Kuh and Whitt, 1998). For an observer tuned into visual phenomena, there is a lot to absorb: human beings given a space of their own will rarely leave it empty of decoration (Altman, 1975; Greenbaum and Greenbaum, 1981; Hansen and Altman, 1976; Schiavo and Miller, 1993). An artist and a member of an academic department, the authors of this paper began to notice the particularly potent kinds of adornments that occur where faculty members are given wide latitude. The question arises: how do faculty members, who are in the business of self-expression, express themselves visually?

Visual self-expression is not exclusively the domain of artists, but may be practiced by a variety of groups in many settings. For university faculty, the office door provides a convenient site for such a display (Schiavo, Madaffari, and Miller, 1999). Much like a blank canvas, the door is an empty space that a professor can fill with images and texts that furnish clues to his or her beliefs, interests, and philosophy of learning (Kaye and Galt, 2002). Faculty members, of course, are not the only

ones who embellish their work spaces. Other sites for this type of decoration include office cubicles, work areas in a factory, and school lockers or residence hall doors. Unlike the school locker or residence hall door, however, the faculty door assumes an official status. It is a threshold through which students, colleagues, and members of the general public must pass to do business with a particular faculty member—a kind of intellectual store window through which professors profess. According to psychologists R. Steven Schiavo, Jennifer West Miller, and Tia M.I. Madaffari, “Office doors are particularly relevant since they serve as a gateway [that] provide[s] a visible introduction to the occupant” (Schiavo, Miller, and Madaffari, 1998, p. 2). And unlike its corporate counterparts, the faculty doorway is situated in a context where the reigning traditions of academic freedom guarantee a unique openness of expression (Becher, 1994; Kuh and Whitt, 1998; Ruscio, 1987). Whereas in the corporate setting, a worker may be forbidden to post any materials that contradict the company’s stated philosophy or suggest that he or she is not a “team player,” faculty members can and do post whatever they see fit. This may include materials that ridicule the theoretical leanings of others, suggest a strong political slant, or disparage the institution in which they are located. It can also include a display of non-traditional hobbies and interests or an openly gay/lesbian lifestyle (Rhoads and Tierney, 1992).

With these observations in mind, we set out to explore the phenomenon of faculty doors. We catalogued the types of things put on doors, and their relationship to the college environment. Were they merely bland and functional (e.g. a pocket in which to hand in papers)? Did they seek to provoke some sort of response (e.g. a political diatribe)? Were they funny? Were they haphazardly placed, or did they try to achieve a kind of harmony with respect to color and arrangement? How did they reflect the professor’s stated views and research agenda, as expressed in his or her publications? Many of the doors, in fact, worked on multiple levels. With their heterogeneous array of images and texts, they could convey a complex picture of the person who sat behind them (Schiavo, Madaffari, and Miller, 1999).

Using a psychological framework, other research on this topic has linked the decoration of faculty doors to theories of personalization: the need to mark the territory as belonging to the owner and as a symbol of commitment to an institution (Hansen and Altman, 1976; Vinsel, Brown, Altman, and Foss, 1976; Schiavo and Miller, 1993). Still others have used survey research to examine student responses to faculty doors (Schiavo, Miller, and Madaffari, 1998). However, our approach was closer to that of a semiologist: decoding the messages imbedded in the decorations themselves and asking how they convey meaning specific to the academic audience. In the same way that semiologists have studied advertisements, we looked at the systems of meaning that faculty doors employ to communicate with the university community around them (Barthes, 1977; Barthes 1957; Williamson, 1978). Our research was less about the faculty member’s effort to relate to his or her colleagues on a personal level, and much more about how he or she used the decorations as another means to convey positions on important academic, political, and social issues. We explored the idea that faculty doors can be an elevated form of self-expression – a visual and verbal position statement directed at the department, institution, and discipline. This naturally led to a discussion of the history and ideology of the university, and particularly the notion of academic freedom (Hofstadter, 1961; Metzger, 1961). It underscored the uniqueness of the university environment, and how it differs from that of other institutions such as corporations or government agencies.

Reflecting on the multi-layered expression found on the doors led to the question of whether they themselves were a kind of art. In entertaining this suggestion, we followed conceptual art's tendency to ask the question "what is art?" by proposing new and unusual objects as art (Godfrey, 1998). In this part of our examination, we compared the professor's arrangement of heterogeneous materials on a door—images, texts, and objects—to the assemblage tradition in visual art. Rooted in dada and the notion of the "readymade," this way of making art finds meaning in commonplace objects by presenting them in new settings, sometimes in enigmatic combinations with other objects. This is not to say that we attempted to "prove" that faculty doors are or are not art; only that art provided a valuable framework through which to discuss faculty doors. As well as considering these ideas in this paper, we devised another way in which to explore the doors' artistic nature: a multi-media installation based on the material we found on them. This part of the project, which is now under development, will take place within the context of an art gallery or alternative exhibition space and will include full-scale photo reproductions of the faculty doors. (Note 1)

## Methods

George Kuh and Elizabeth Whitt note that to provide a rich description of an institution's cultural properties,

methods of inquiry are required that can discover core assumptions and beliefs held by faculty, students, and others and the meanings various groups give to artifacts. Techniques of inquiry appropriate for studying culture include observing participants, interviewing key informants, conducting autobiographical interviews, and analyzing documents (1998, p. vii).

Our research focuses on the analysis of documents or artifacts and began with an examination of actual faculty doors. We also observed the interactions of people within the departments (students, faculty, and staff). We hoped to learn how the doors could inform our understanding of the culture of the department and institution in which they were located. From the outset, we made it a goal to examine the doors of faculty in diverse types of colleges and universities. We selected three institutions with different cultures and missions: Georgia State University, Spelman College, and Emory University (all located in Atlanta, Georgia).

Knowing that academic culture varies by discipline, we chose to focus on a single field for all of the institutions we visited (Kuh and Whitt, 1998). We sought to discover the ways in which discipline influenced the selection of materials to place on the door. Because English is a staple department in almost every institution of higher education in the United States (and thus we could expect to find a sizeable English department on any campus we visited), we chose it as the focus of our study. We sent email messages to all of the faculty members in the English departments of Emory University, Spelman College, and Georgia State University. Our email message contained a brief description of the research project and asked faculty members if we could photograph their door. From those who agreed to participate, we requested a current curriculum vitae and a signed release form. We visited each of the departments on a Wednesday afternoon between 3:00 p.m. and 6:00 p.m. Using a digital camera, we photographed a total of 35 faculty doors, and made written observations of the remaining doors in the departments (10 doors at Emory University, 14 doors at

Georgia State University, and 11 doors at Spelman College). In addition, we spent time observing the activities in each department. Upon processing the photos, we looked for themes and modes of self expression. We compared these to the existing literature on departmental culture, English department culture, and faculty expression. In addition, we reviewed the faculty curriculum vitae to understand individual interests, activities, and backgrounds.

## **Institutional Descriptions**

*Spelman College* – A small, private liberal arts college, Spelman is one of two historically black colleges for women in the United States (Bennett College in North Carolina is the other one). It was established in 1881. The primarily residential college is a member of the Atlanta University Center consortium and is located on the southwest side of Atlanta. Through this affiliation, the 2100 Spelman students enjoy the benefits of a small college while also having access to the resources of the five participating black colleges that make up the Atlanta University Center (Brazzell, 1992; Cox, 1985; Edelman, 2000; Guy-Sheftall, 1982). According to Spelman College’s statement of purpose,

The educational program at the College is designed to give students a comprehensive liberal arts background through study in the fine arts, humanities, social sciences, and natural sciences. Students are encouraged to think critically and creatively and to improve their communicative, quantitative, and technological skills (Spelman College Statement of Purpose, 1999).

Moreover, Spelman purports to “reinforce a sense of pride and hope, develops character, and inspires the love of learning... Spelman has been and expects to continue to be a major resource for educating black women leaders” (Spelman College Statement of Purpose, 1999).

*Georgia State University* – Located in the heart of downtown Atlanta, Georgia State University is an urban research university. Although students have been non-traditional in the past, the current student body reflects a more traditional (18-22) aged student. With an enrollment of over 27,000 students, Georgia State offers 52 undergraduate and graduate degree programs in over 250 fields of study. In addition, the institution boasts opportunities for participation in innovative research projects and community involvement. Established in 1913, the institution’s ties to the local urban community permeate its mission and its strategic plan (Flanders, 1955). According to its internet site, Georgia State University “breaks the ivory tower mold of higher education and makes the most of its urban home by bringing teaching, research and service to life.” By combining “traditional university education with the unique opportunities found in a growing international city, Georgia State University allows students to learn not only in the classroom but also in the busy surrounding city, where high profile companies provide hands-on experience” (Georgia State In-Depth, 2002).

*Emory University* – Located just minutes from downtown Atlanta, Emory University is a private research university with over 11,000 students. Emory was founded at Oxford, Georgia by the Methodist Church in 1836 (English, 1966). The institution is composed of nine major academic divisions, numerous centers of advanced study, and several affiliated institutions. According to the university’s president, “Emory strives to help its students, faculty, and staff [members] achieve their highest aspirations: to discover truth, share it, and ignite in others a passion for its pursuit” (Chace,

2002, n.p.).

## **University Culture**

According to George Kuh and Elizabeth Whitt, “institutional culture is both a process and a product.” It is “revealed through an examination of espoused and enacted values and the core beliefs and assumptions shared by institutional leaders, faculty, students, and other constituents, such as alumni and parents” (1998, p. iv). Much like culture in general, university culture is based on shared values and belief systems that serve to convey a sense of institutional identity, instill a commitment to the institution rather than just oneself, shape and guide personal and professional behavior, and foster stability in the overall institution (Kuh and Whitt, 1998). Above all, “because culture is bound to a context, every institution’s culture is different” and unique (Kuh and Whitt, 1998, p. 13). Because it holds the interests and traditions of the community in high esteem sometimes institutional culture can conflict with academic freedom. Occasionally, the research and teaching interests of faculty members conflict with community norms.

Kuh and Whitt also describe three basic values pertaining to college and universities and faculty. First is the “pursuit and dissemination of knowledge as the purpose of higher education. The primary responsibility of faculty members, then, is to be learned and to convey this learning by means of teaching, inquiry, and publication.” Second is the tenet that faculty should have autonomy in the pursuit of their academic work. And third, faculty must profess a belief in collegiality and demonstrate this belief “in a community of scholars that provides mutual support and opportunities for social interaction and in faculty governance” (1998, p. 76). And, according to the American Association of University Professors’ (AAUP) Statement on Academic Freedom, the college professor has both freedom within the classroom and freedom to research and publish on the subjects of his or her choice (Hofstadter and Metzger, 1955).

The existence of a strong university culture can have both positive and negative effects. The pressure to behave in ways that are culturally acceptable may constrict innovation and difference (Kuh and Whitt, 1998). Of more concern,

A dominant culture presents difficulties to newcomers or members of underrepresented groups when trying to understand and appreciate the nuances of behavior. At worst, culture can be an alienating, ethnocentric force that goads members of a group, sometimes out of fear and sometimes out of ignorance, to reinforce their own beliefs while rejecting those of other groups (Kuh and Whitt, 1998, p. 15).

What happens when a faculty member chooses not to agree with society’s culture; or an institution’s culture; or a department’s culture? How is this disagreement made manifest in a visual way?

## **Disciplinary Culture**

The culture of a faculty member’s discipline is the primary source of faculty identity (Kuh and Whitt, 1998). For example, Howard R. Bowen and Jack H. Schuster found that faculty members

of different disciplines exhibit diverse attitudes, values, and personal traits (1998; Kuh and Whitt, 1998). Likewise, Everett C. Ladd and Seymour M. Lipset found that political and social attitudes differed across academic disciplines (Ladd and Lipset, in Kuh and Whitt, 1998). For example, the most liberal ideas and attitudes were expressed by faculty in the social sciences and the most conservative by professors in the applied professional fields.

Nationally, English department culture is known for being volatile – a place where the “culture wars” have taken place (and are still taking place depending upon the institution). Some English departments have survived the war, whereas others, such as Columbia University’s, have been decimated. According to Mark Krupnick, a professor of literature in the *Divinity School* (Note 2) at the University of Chicago, the typical explanation for these “cultural wars” is a combination of intellectual and political divisions:

First, starting with the invasion of French poststructuralism in the 1960s, advanced literary interpretation changed from being formalist in method and traditionalist in ideology to a brand of French theory whose major distinguishing characteristics seemed to be that it required you to spend more time reading the theorist than reading the canonical texts of Western literature. The second major explanation for the culture wars is that they basically have been about politics, set off when ‘60s radicals took their battles from the streets into university departments (Krupnick, 2002, p. B16).

Of course, Krupnick's explanation is tinged with bias; however, his perspective is not alone. Within the field of English, there is much that has been written about the “cultural wars” and their effect on the discipline of English as a whole (Clausen, 1990; Dumont, 1982; Gates, 1992; Gossett, 1994; Gregory, 1997; Heller, 1998; Krupnick, 2002; Stimpson, 2002). Specifically, research has focused on the factionalization and sometimes destruction of departments, the effect of these factions on student learning, and the fractured literary canon that has resulted. When visiting the individual departments, we looked for signs of these national issues that might appear on faculty doors.

## **Individual English Department Observations**

To provide additional context for this paper, we have included descriptions, based on departmental mission and our observations.

*Spelman College* – Located in the recently built Camille Olivia Hanks Cosby Academic Center, the English department at Spelman College is “dedicated to the goal of creating accomplished writers, critical thinkers, and effective communicators.” The department is designed around a new suite of offices. All of the furniture, carpeting, and artwork are brand new. The hallways are bright and sunny and very quiet. Most faculty members leave their doors just slightly ajar; many are meeting with students. Although there are plenty of desks and plenty of room for graduate students to work, most of the desks are empty and unused. The receptionist’s area is unstaffed and students use it as a work space.

*Emory University* – Located in Emory University’s quadrangle of historic buildings, the English department occupies three floors of the Calloway Memorial Center. The department offers courses



at both the graduate and undergraduate level and has an interdisciplinary focus. The halls are dark and very quiet. Few faculty members are in their offices and most of the activity in the department takes place in the graduate assistant offices.

*Georgia State University* – Located in the General Classroom building, the English department is on the 9<sup>th</sup> floor. The walls are gray and many faculty members do not have windows in their offices. The department is bustling with activity: graduate students in conversation about both academic and personal subjects, radios blaring the day's news (National Public Radio), and people constantly coming and going. Georgia State doors were, in fact, more likely to be open than those of the other institutions.

## **Faculty Doors: Common Themes**

During our visits, we observed and photographed many common elements in faculty door decorations. Some display items were strictly functional; others were of a personal nature; and still others were political, and seemingly unrelated to a professor's field of study. Most had more than one purpose.

Certain items on faculty doors reflected city-wide cultural events that were taking place at the time. For example, several faculty members at all three institutions displayed a poster for an interdisciplinary conference on lynching and racial violence that was taking place at Emory University and other venues throughout town. The conference was of interest to English students because it included papers on African American literature and lynching as well as poetry and drama events. The conference had a strong political dimension; its timing corresponded to a controversial exhibition of lynching photographs that took place at the Martin Luther King, Jr. Historical Site. Thus by displaying the poster, faculty members were taking a specific stand on the value of not only viewing the photographs but also publicly discussing the subject of lynching, which for many has been taboo, especially in the South.

Not surprisingly, the largest number of posters for the lynching conference was at Spelman, the historically black college. In fact, there were more posters in the English department at Spelman than at Emory where the conference took place. The lynching poster exemplified a number of key themes pertaining to faculty doors. One important use of door decoration was to promote the activities of the discipline, whether they were on campus or elsewhere in the community. For example, several professors at both Emory and Spelman posted a flyer for "Poetry at Tech" (the first annual Bourne poetry reading at the Georgia Institute of Technology – Georgia Tech). Other examples of discipline specific events included a flyer for a reading by Pulitzer Prize winning poet Yusef Kamunyakaa (Emory); and a student-produced play entitled "What I Gave You" by Cassandra Henderson (Spelman).

Like the aforementioned lynching poster, numerous other postings on faculty doors had a political dimension. These were related to the faculty members' discipline in varying degrees—some not at all. A posting that was discipline related but even more specifically political than the lynching poster was on the door of a female English professor at Georgia State University. In this case, the posting took aim at a recent Southern Baptists' pronouncement relegating women to a subordinate status. In a clever use of the literary past, the counter argument was delivered by 18<sup>th</sup> century English

author and feminist Mary Wollstonecraft (Note 3) but framed as if quoted from a recent interview: “Author Mary Wollstonecraft, contacted recently, had this to say in response to the Southern Baptists’ call for wives to submit to their husbands’ leadership.” The ensuing response was taken from an 18<sup>th</sup> century source. More tenuously connected to the discipline of English is a Georgia State professor’s posting of the famous photograph from Tiananmen Square showing a lone protestor facing down tanks. This photograph sent a clear message about individual freedom; its connection to free speech (and hence to English) is discernable only when read in the context of other materials posted on the same door. A nearby photograph shows a library in ruins (apparently a bombed out building from World War II). Together the images speak eloquently about the political ramifications of free speech and the exchange of information. Interestingly, this professor’s vita contained nothing related to the political concerns expressed on his door. Clearly the choice to include these materials was a personal one.

Some doors displayed political messages that were not at all connected to the study of English. For example, one faculty member’s door at Emory consisted entirely of a large poster with the headline “The Choice is Yours,” which sounded an alarm about population growth in the United States. This poster used demographic data in the form of line graphs to advocate the curtailment of immigration (both legal and illegal) – a position that was bound to be inflammatory for some viewers. As there was nothing else posted on this door, the statement stood out as strictly political; no other image or text tied it to the professor’s discipline. Although this professor’s research and writings were on middle English women’s devotional literature, his service record as a faculty member includes the presidency of Emory University’s American Association of University Professors (AAUP). This would seem to suggest a strong interest in preserving his academic freedom and rights of self expression.

Another category of materials not related to discipline was calls for community involvement. For example, a professor at Spelman posted a sign encouraging students to join Habitat for Humanity. On this same door (and slightly more connected to English) was a sign advertising “Teach for America” with the headline “You Want to Change Things.” Also at Spelman, another door had a sign advertising the Peace Corp and participation in it. In many cases, these items promoted community-related activities in which the professors themselves were active participants (as noted on their curriculum vitae).

Some items on the doors seemed to serve an aesthetic and a practical purpose rather than conveying a direct message. For example, doors at Spelman College all had a narrow vertical window on them. Individual faculty members had, for the sake of privacy, found innovative ways of covering these openings. One faculty member coated the window with texturized material that gave the appearance of frosted glass; on this she placed floral appliqué. A similar approach was used by another Spelman faculty member, but in this case the appliqué was an African zigzag patterned cloth.

A third Spelman professor carefully placed a series of postcards of art from a variety of cultures (African and Japanese) on his window. These decorations covered the maximum amount of window area but were also centered and organized in a pattern that alternated darker and lighter tones. Yet another Spelman faculty member plastered her door window with movie images, including a poster for the Kenneth Branagh film adaptation of *Hamlet* (discipline related), and a



close up of Denzel Washington's face, apparently from a poster for the movie *Hurricane* (this was a lone black individual on a door populated mostly by white figures from English literature).

For some faculty members, the arrangement of elements seemed to be as important as what they chose to include. For example, an Emory University professor who studies Ralph Ellison's impact and role in African

American literature chose to display photos of the famous author on his door. A group of three of these photos was arranged in a symmetrical pattern with the lynching poster in the center. The serene black and white of the photos contrasted forcefully with the intense reds of the lynching poster; this dichotomy was amplified by the absence of any other materials on the door. Although the subject was paramount, this professor had clearly given some thought to aesthetics.

Another display that was of note for its aesthetic qualities was found on the door of a Georgia State University professor. This time, however, the selection of materials had no apparent connection to the professor's main field of interest, which was Edmund Spenser, the English Renaissance poet. This faculty member's door adornments included samples of wrapping



paper designed by artist Ken Brown—the subject of which was vintage homoerotic literature (“The Mother Truckers,” “Nautipuss,” and “I Prefer Girls”). Another wrapping paper design by the same artist was a spoof of Spanish *lotería* cards. These also had a type of bawdy humor (“La Lawn Butt,” “Los Briefs,” and “La Day Old Meatloaf”). The paper samples were brightly colored and arranged in a more or less symmetrical pattern along with several cartoons. Like the population control poster mentioned earlier, some of these materials might be considered offensive – and not

easily justified by a connection to the discipline. But, the professors in question clearly felt that they had a right to display them. In fact, the Georgia State professor was eager to answer questions about the images and talk about his related interests in contemporary art.



Apparently, the materials displayed on this professor's door were a kind of personal pastime, and an aspect of his personality that he wished to share with his colleagues and students. Other faculty members in the department encouraged us to view this specific door and include it in the study. (Note 4)

Unlike the population control polemic displayed by the Emory professor, this set of

materials also had a humorous side; humor was another major category of materials we observed. According to R. Steven Schiavo's research on faculty doors at Wellesley College, 33% of the 60 faculty doors that he examined had cartoons on them. When asked to react to these doors, students thought the faculty behind them would be friendly, humorous, and easy to approach (Schiavo and Miller, 1993). As mentioned, there were cartoons placed among the wrapping paper samples (Gary Larson's *Farside* and Matt Groening's *Life in Hell*). Often professors would combine humor with messages related to the discipline of English. On the above-mentioned *Life in Hell*, for example, the professor added the caption "The reason for the passive voice" over a cartoon showing the signature rabbit character explaining his messy room to the authority figure with the words "Mistakes were made." The department chair at Georgia State also displayed a cartoon on his door. Interested in American drama, this professor chose a cartoon showing small children being prodded by their teacher to perform the rather glum Arthur Miller play *Death of a Salesman*: "O.K. Willy drag yourself to the table and collapse in despair. Enter Biff."

Among the other items faculty members chose to display were family photos and artwork done by their own children. At Georgia State, for example, one professor displayed a piece of artwork with the caption "Hand's print" and the name Noah printed in child-like writing in the top left corner. This faculty member placed the impression of his son's hands at a child's eye level. Another door in the same department featured a photograph of two of the professor's children in Halloween costumes. This photograph was secured by a souvenir Beefeater clip from London. Such casual displays of family materials were rare in the English department at Spelman College and non-existent at Emory.

Finally, there were many items on faculty members' doors that were strictly functional. For example, numerous professors at both Spelman and Georgia State placed envelopes or pockets on their doors to distribute syllabi and student information. Among the most elaborate was a Georgia State professor's, which consisted of a four-section plastic paper holder with one section devoted

to each of her classes. Spelman College doors were all outfitted with slots to receive student papers. Also very common at Spelman and Georgia State were postings of departmental events and deadlines, registration information and office hours. These items were noticeably absent from Emory's English department hallways.

Among the functional postings were many that assisted students not only in their coursework but in their extracurricular activities, and career plans as well. These were most common at Spelman College and included a sign-up sheet for a film club, an advertisement for a graduate student recruitment fair, a posting for a Dow Jones Newspaper Fund internship, and a call for student academic presentations entitled, "Food for Thought." Also common at Spelman were notices advertising the accomplishments of current and past students. For example, several professors' doors featured an ad for the book, *Leaving Atlanta*, by Spelman graduate Tayari Jones. In addition, several faculty members posted copies of opinion articles by students published in the *Atlanta Journal Constitution*. The previously mentioned notice about the play "What I Gave You" also advertised student work. Again, this type of posting was very common at Spelman, less common at Georgia State, and rare at Emory.

## **Faculty Doors and Institutional Culture**

Certain patterns emerge in the decoration of the doors that seem to reflect institutional differences. As mentioned earlier, Spelman College's mission was the most committed to undergraduate education, and in particular, the preparation of young black women for leadership roles. It was not surprising, then, that Spelman doors contained the most material of use to students: signup sheets, course handouts and the like, but above all, postings that touted the accomplishments of current and former students. These materials all spoke emphatically of the professor's responsibility to ensure the student's success in college and after. Every effort was made to provide students with the information necessary for the completion of their course work, and afterward, for job placement and recognition of their career achievements. This commitment by professors to the student's well-being was borne out by other aspects of Spelman's curriculum as well. The authors themselves had the chance to attend a mandatory assembly featuring guest speaker Ertha K it, whose colorful and upbeat recollections were clearly intended to motivate and inspire her audience. Other campus events, including art exhibitions, music performances, and plays, were selected with the idea in mind of highlighting the achievements of black women.

Although Georgia State's doors also boasted an array of student-oriented materials, what was most noticeable in this department was the lively and idiosyncratic nature of the postings there. Georgia State's English department had more humorous or witty decorations, and more material that expressed highly personal concerns (e.g. the gay fetish wrapping paper). This sensibility was complemented by the generally lively atmosphere of the department. As mentioned earlier, Georgia State's hallways were the most active. Students and faculty there seemed eager to give us directions and provide information. Was this upbeat atmosphere a fact of institutional culture at Georgia State? Was there a campus-wide push, similar to that of Spelman, to create a friendly, student-oriented environment there?

The authors' knowledge of other departments at Georgia State seems to suggest otherwise. Some were devoid of activity; others had a policy of disallowing door displays. In fact Georgia State was

a large and diverse institution, and one whose mission seemed to be in flux. Started as the evening commerce school for the Georgia Institute of Technology, the institution had recently been awarded research university status within the state and within the new Carnegie Classifications. Unlike Spelman, Georgia State lacked campus-wide agreement about the relative importance of teaching versus research.

The atmosphere at Emory's department of English was considerably less lively. Although we visited all three departments during the same time period, few of the Emory faculty members were in their offices; we had trouble finding a student to give us directions. Also notable at Emory was the proliferation of political messages on doors. In addition to the aforementioned population control poster, for example, there was a bold-lettered notice condemning the voting irregularities of the 2000 election, and questioning the legitimacy of the Bush administration. On the other hand, Emory's doors were devoid of family pictures or artwork. It would be easy to infer, based on these observations, a connection between the relatively chilly atmosphere in Emory's English department and the confrontational nature of its postings. Similarly, one might conclude that the lively and humorous character of the Georgia State displays was tied to the upbeat atmosphere in that school's English department.

Such conclusions risk oversimplification, however. In fact, the notion of academic freedom makes it likely that each person's door was first the product of his or her personal agenda, and secondly that of the institution in which it was situated. The definition of academic freedom is ambiguous and conflicting: it pertains to the freedoms of the faculty, the freedoms of institutions of higher education, and the freedoms of students. However, the courts have interpreted academic freedom to include the free exchange of ideas. Specifically, in *Keyishian v. Board of Regents*, the Court noted, "The nation's future depends upon leaders trained through wide exposure to that robust exchange of ideas which discovers truth 'out of a multitude of tongues, [rather] than through any kind of authoritative selection'" (385 U.S. 589, 603, 1967). Given this interpretation of academic freedom, it would stand to reason that faculty should be free to place what they want on their doors – the doors and their very presence in the department act as a form of education and make a contribution to the marketplace of ideas (Rabban, 2001).

Where does this freedom originate? According to Richard Hofstadter and Walter P. Metzger, the traditions of the university, including tenure, peer review, and shared governance, place professors in a unique position with respect to their institutions (Hofstadter and Metzger, 1955). Tenure, for example, makes it unlikely that professors will be summarily dismissed for expressing unorthodox views. An even more compelling reason for faculty members' job stability is their relative scarcity: a university that fires a prolific and well-regarded academic has no guarantee of finding a replacement, and does so at its own peril. This enables each professor to behave as an independent power center. The door to his or her office is the doorway to a private realm—a place in which he or she is free to set a teaching and research agenda without interference.

As mentioned earlier, English departments across the country have suffered from the "culture wars". However, we saw very little direct visual evidence of these wars in the departments we visited. Did the fact that one Georgia State professor's display of homoerotic wrapping paper faced another's poster advertising Shakespeare's *Much Ado About Nothing* indicate that the two

individuals were locked into disagreement about what should be included in the literary canon? Most likely not – the academic interests of the owner of the homoerotic wrapping paper (Edmund Spenser) were as much a part of the Western literary canon as Shakespeare was.

Faculty independence means that academic departments can and must allow postings by individual members that may be offensive to others. And, members of the department are expected to respond to these postings in the spirit of academic freedom: if a neighbor wishes to post inflammatory materials, they must not be inflamed. For this reason, the presence of such materials is not in-and-of-itself evidence of bad relationships within a department.

## Comparisons to Conceptual Art

Strongly individualistic visual displays, which are tied to multiple agendas and understandable on multiple levels—this describes faculty doors nicely, but in our minds could serve equally well as a definition of art. Whence does such a definition originate? In the past, few felt compelled to define art, as it had a specific role to play within socio-economic and religious systems. In the words of art critic Suzi Gablik (1984), “Until we come to the modern epoch, all art had a social significance and a social obligation” (p. 24). Artists created works (as in the European Renaissance) at the behest of wealthy patrons and religious leaders. Paintings and sculptures adorned churches, for example, to instruct the illiterate masses about religious belief. But during the modern period (beginning in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century), art “cut itself loose from its social moorings” and became concerned with individual self-expression (Gablik, 1984. p. 21). The essence of modern art – in particular, the abstraction of the early to mid 20<sup>th</sup> century – was unfettered exploration of the artist’s soul. Not tied to a specific patron or social function, the artist’s role came close to that of the professor which we described above: a free agent pursuing his or her own creative agenda.

As modern abstraction exhausted itself during the early 1960s (perhaps as a result of turning inward to the point of solipsistic imprisonment), art again began to explore the social conditions in which it existed – but this time without any allegiance to a style or a tradition of art making. The modus operandi of the new art was to blur the boundaries between art and life (Haskell, 1984). It made use of every kind of source material available and challenged every sacred cow of previous art. Junk art vastly expanded the range of materials from which an artist could draw. Pop art demolished the boundary between high and low culture. Fluxus and performance art allowed chance events to shape the work, taking away the requirement that art be a fixed object (Haskell, 1984). (Note 5) Conceptual art challenged the notion that art should be strictly retinal – that is to say, shun the verbal and communicate through visual means only (Godfrey, 1998).

It is here that we can begin to connect visual art to faculty door decorations. Compared to masterpieces of the past, of course, faculty door decorations come up short. They are not one of a kind, not made by a trained professional, and adhere to no specific principle of craft and formal cohesion (Gablik, 1984). They incorporate mass-produced materials, not created solely by their owners. Being subject to change at any time, they are not fixed objects to be passed on to the next generation. Nor can they be bought or sold as commodities like Renaissance portraits.

But it is precisely these factors that invite us to compare faculty door decorations to contemporary art. Because recent art (and especially conceptual art) discards the requirement that art be a

unique, enduring object, and accepts any imaginative use of visual materials (including text), it prompts all kinds of propositions about what might be entered in as art (Godfrey, 1998).

Among the early antecedents to conceptual art was Marcel Duchamp's "Fountain," which, by placing an ordinary urinal in an art gallery, asked whether it was the context, not the form that made the work of art (Morgan, 1994). This display by Duchamp, along with others such as an inverted bicycle wheel, and hat-rack, were described as "readymades": mass produced objects, which in the hands of the artist became vessels for cultural commentary. As collections of decidedly non-art materials, faculty door decorations, like readymades, operate strictly through context.

As conceptual art evolved, it challenged typical notions of art objects in other ways as well. For example, author Tony Godfrey refers to a whole category of works as "anti-form sculptures" based on their use of unpredictable or changeable materials (Godfrey, 1998). Among these are Robert Smithson's earthworks, such as *Asphalt Rundown* from 1967. In this work, the artist arranged for a dump truck to dump a load of asphalt into an empty quarry near Rome, Italy. The art consisted of whatever form was created by the process of the asphalt falling down the wall. Other artists such as Rafael Ferrer used ice or leaves—materials that were subject to change during the life of the piece—to make art works that changed as those materials decayed or melted.

Contemporary art, and in particular, conceptual art also departed from past artistic traditions in its placement of text on an equal footing with images. The modernism of the early to mid twentieth century struggled to assert that art could speak through shape, line, and color alone. Its language was pre-verbal, and therefore universally understandable (Gablík, 1984). Conceptual art, on the other hand, conceded that words were thoroughly intertwined with our visual language, and embraced them as one of many possible means of expression. According to artist Joseph Kosuth, "Fundamental to this idea of art is the understanding of the linguistic nature of all art propositions, be they past or present, and regardless of the elements used in their construction" (Kosuth in Godfrey, 1998, p. 163). Hence the appearance of a whole category of works that might be described as "text pieces:" items in which text was used as a counterpoint to the imagery, or a substitute for it. These include John Baldessari's paintings of text passages about the process of painting; Bruce Nauman's neon signs "Live and die, die and die, shit and die, etc.;" Adrian Piper's racially provocative images scrawled on *New York Times* covers; and Barbara Kruger's famous pairings of words with images from advertising and popular culture: "I shop therefore I am; "We don't need another hero" (Godfrey, 1998). In these cases, the art is less the object itself than the proposition made by the text, or the juxtaposition of text and image. In some cases this proposition is about the nature of art; in others, the nature of life; and still others, it is political.

Numerous faculty door decorations we observed could be described as "text pieces." Examples include the item at Georgia State juxtaposing Mary Wollstonecraft's words with those of the Southern Baptists' Convention; the clever counterpoint of current news media with historical texts was akin to the kind of feminist critique present in the works by artists Barbara Kruger and Adrian Piper, mentioned above. Another example was the overlay of the words "The reason for the passive voice" on the *Farside* cartoon. Although it certainly contained a caveat for the student about good and bad writing, it also addressed widespread concerns about the obfuscation of meaning (particularly in political discourse) through fuzzy language. In these examples, faculty door decorations also made "propositions" much like those of contemporary art—only this time the



subject was the academic as well as the philosophical, phenomenological, and political.

## Conclusion

In his novel, *The Corrections*, Jonathan Franzen writes (from the point of view of Chip, an English professor),

Through his open door Chip could see the door of Vendla O’Fallon’s office. It was papered with healthful images and adages—Betty Friedan in 1965, beaming Guatemalan peasant women, a triumphant female soccer star, a Bass Ale poster of Virginia Woolf, SUBVERT THE DOMINANT PARADIGM—that reminded him, in a dreary way, of his old girlfriend Tori Timmelman. His feeling about decorating doors was: What are we, high-school kids? Are these our bedrooms? (Franzen, 2001, p. 49)

The departmental hallways we observed did not look like high school lockers or teenagers’ bedrooms, however. Far from being inane or immature, their decorations showed careful thought and consideration. They attended to the needs of those around them (as in the case of notices, and calls for participation), but also embellished these materials in ways that elucidated the significance of the academic endeavor in general. Nor did they shrink from addressing controversial issues (although there is still disagreement on the extent of faculty freedom to express opinions outside of their field of expertise). If faculty door decorations have the potential to show an individual professor’s concerns, philosophy, and aspirations, then this mode of expression may be a way to reach out to the university community. Perhaps this is why, according to R. Steven Schiavo’s research, faculty with richly decorated doors are more likely to be described by students as “friendly” (Schiavo, Madaffari, and Millier, 1999). Far from being pretentious (as one professor who did not want to participate in our study asserted) door decorations indicate a desire to embody through succinct, visual means (very much in the mode of contemporary art), what is expressed at length in a professor’s research, teaching, and service. In other words, they are an auxiliary channel of communication for a faculty member, whose work frequently gets lost in the sometimes arcane world of scholarly journal articles. Like art, the decorations operate as an organic entity: they are complex, subject to change, and open to interpretation by different viewers (Kuh and Whitt, 1998; Schein, 1984). Each viewer is free to draw his or her own conclusions. Nevertheless, faculty doors are a key element in the academic environment and should be carefully considered by anyone wishing to understand the culture and dynamics of an academic department. The one thing to be said about faculty door decorations is that they are not one thing – they reflect and add to departmental culture, communicate ideas, inspire thought, and challenge their viewers.

## Notes

1. Currently the authors have proposals under consideration for the presentation of such an installation at galleries in Atlanta and Philadelphia.
2. Mark Krupnick was once in the English department at the University of Chicago but “jumped

ship” to take a position in religion and literature in the Divinity School in 1990.

3. Mary Wollstonecraft was an early advocate of equal education for women, and she penned the *Vindication of the Rights of Women* (1792) often cited as the first great feminist document.

4. However, we chose not to pinpoint specific individuals and instead relied on faculty members to contact us after receiving our initial invitation to participate in the project. This professor contacted us on his own initiative.

5. An early antecedent is John Cage’s music (e.g., 4’ 33” in which a pianist sits silently for the duration of the piece and the music is whatever background noise occurs during that time).

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