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Gossip and Ghosts

Spectres of Lost Feminist Utopias

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If he loves justice ... the 'scholar' of the future, the 'intellectual' of tomorrow should learn it ... from the ghost. He should learn to live by learning not how to make conversation with the ghost but how to talk with him, with her, how to let them speak or how to give them back speech, even if it is in oneself, in the other, in the other in oneself: they are always *there*, spectres, even if they do not exist, even if they are no longer, even if they are not yet ...

(Derrida 1994: 176)



The creative community in St Ives, Cornwall in the mid-twentieth century is characterised as a 'bohemian community dominated by art, alcohol and sex', according to Chris Stephens, former curator of British Modernism at Tate. (1997:21)



“Friend of mine in London...Packed up and came down here. John wrote me a letter saying that they’ve got the most fabulous parties...John Milne and all was still alive”

John Emanuel (2011)

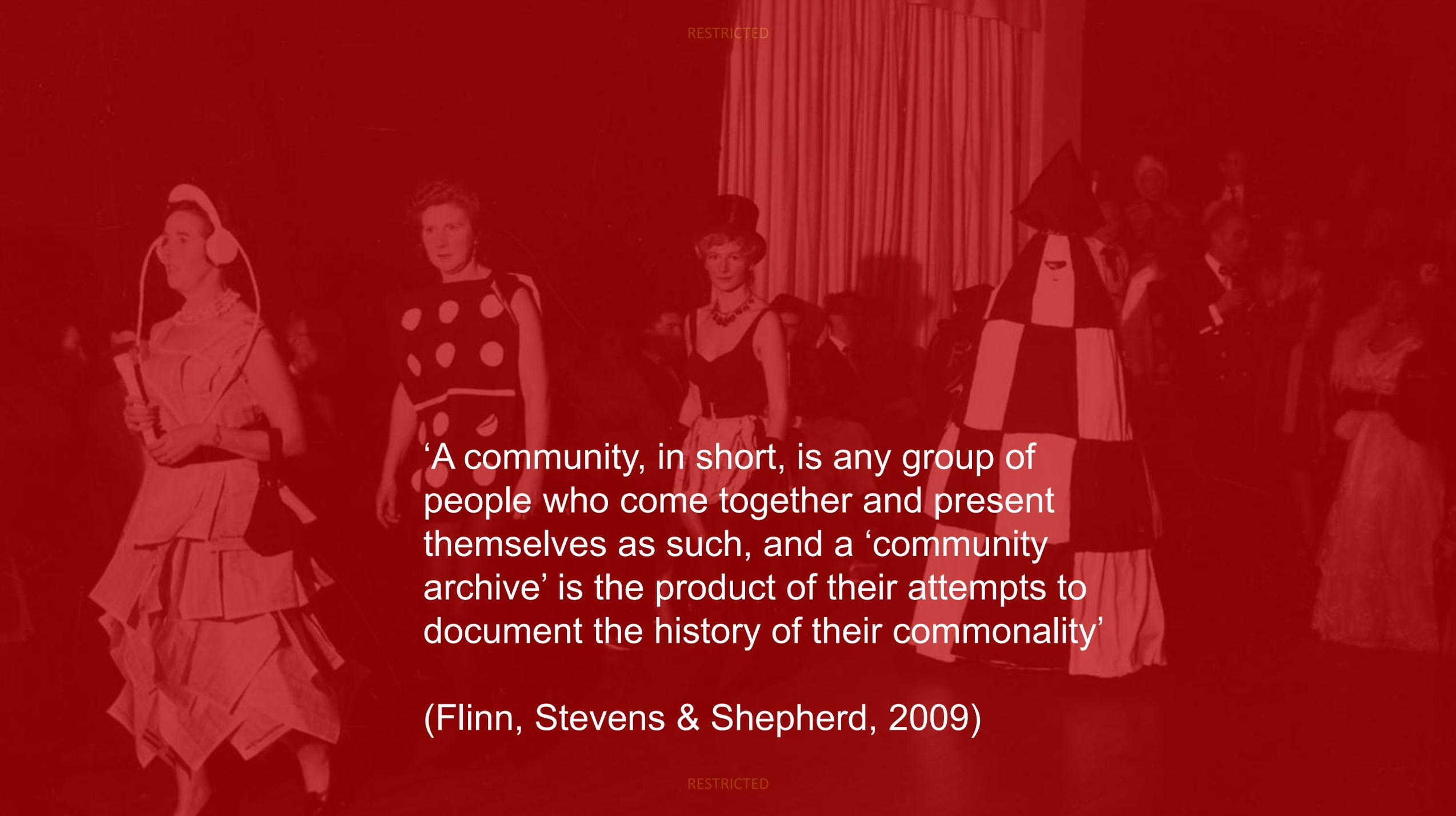
“But you knew that Cornwall had a reputation as an artists’ colony? Didn’t you?”

“Tom, I’m much more ignorant than that I tell you! I came down to Cornwall because I thought it was very cheap...”

“This is the reason that many artists heard...”

“...and again it was romantic, it was full of wild women and wild parties.”

Tom Cross and Karl Weschke (1983)



‘A community, in short, is any group of people who come together and present themselves as such, and a ‘community archive’ is the product of their attempts to document the history of their commonality’

(Flinn, Stevens & Shepherd, 2009)

The true and the false may be found in abundance in St Ives, and sometimes, as in a dreamy montage, they bewilderingly overlap. The best food in town is served in a restaurant called the Outrigger, with a Polynesian decor and Hawaiian music on tape. There is a small factory in the upper Stennack said to be the headquarters of the world's largest cutters of ivory. Top pop guitarists swear by St Ives plectra. Peter Johnson, the proprietor of Comus Boutique, who has something of a reputation as a creator of beach hats, recently summed up the new spirit of St Ives in these words: 'People with oomph don't want to tart up some little mews house in London anymore. They want to get up and go, and tart up a little cottage in St Ives. This is Chelsea by the sea'.

(Telegraph Magazine, 1964)

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Yes
Well

She used to see Boots Boots was at Trevaylor With Nancy
Wynne Jones
Boots was Mary Redgrave
And she had the New Craftsman Shop with Janet Leach

(Stella Benjamin, 2009)

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**“Oh yes no word a joke...Miss Heath...Oh my g...
Isobel Heath...No she had a studio in Custom
Lane...Custom House Lane...And she was very
masculine...She got married after...Yeah...She was
masculine...And she did paintings...Isobel Heath...
Yeah...She lived at the Bosun’s Nest...Yeah...I know
her as well...Bosun’s Nest...I know her as well”**

Rebecca Craze (2009)

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HART'S
DAIRY ICE CREAM PARLOUR



Oh yes

Lots of parties

Lots

Well the artists themselves

I mean there were

Everybody turned up and brought something

Brought a bottle I s'pose

And that's how it all grew

But um

There were a lot of parties

I didn't go to them all by any means

[laughs]

Because I had to get someone to look after my baby

Mamie Lewis 2009

WORLD
RENOWNED
ICE
CREAM

MADE FROM
FRESH

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I was a potter/I worked/I went to work with Jess Val Baker/In the Mask Potter/I used to go to Jess's/And we had parties at Jess's/Because/Um/**We were all/Of the same political feel/**At the time/But also of course in St Ives at the time we had Troika/Benny/And Lesley/All the Troika people/ Who were great friends/We all/Again/**We used to go to parties/**Because that's what we all did

(Beck, 2009)

And we all just got together/And had parties/That was/That's a whole different story/
But/I mean/Yes/And I s'pose/We used to have regular parties/There were parties/ Always/Every week somebody had a party/And you just went along/And it wasn't hard drinking or anything/Sometimes you'd just sit there/And talk all night/Sit on the settee and talk to somebody/Because you hadn't seen them for ages/But it was/Just a/They were social get-togethers rather than parties

(Beck, 2011)

My friend and I decided in the middle sixties/To
have an anti-Vietnam shop/Very naughty I
suppose/In Fore Street/**We were so fed up with
the terrible things that were going on/**And
there was a shop in Fore Street that was coming
up/And of course people thought/Who were
these two girls/Well who are they/And I was
talking to Patrick about it/And he said/Oh tell
them I'll stand guarantor if there's any
problem/And Barbara said the same/So Barbara
and Patrick/Stood guarantor for Jill and I/While
**we ran our anti-Vietnam War shop/In the mid-
sixties/In Fore Street**

(Beck, 2009)

Imagine an artists' colony and you'll picture St Ives, Cornwall, complete with narrow, cobbled streets, fishermen's cottages and boats bobbing in the harbour. It seems almost too good to be true - especially the first impression of picture postcard beauty - when you round the last bend of the road and see St Ives Harbour stretched out below you. The atmosphere is Continental. And, walking through the steep streets which line the hillside and spill over a small hump towards the seashore, you could imagine yourself in a little French fishing town. St Ives used to be a simple fishing port with a fleet of over a hundred boats. But during the past eight years or so - without any planning - it has become one of Britain's most important art centres. Fishing lofts have been converted into artists' houses, studios have sprung up everywhere, and there's even a new block of studios soaring.

(Val Baker, 1960:43)

And I sat in the window/Wondering/If
ever /You know/Winter/Winter's
Cornish
weather/Yeah/This little
cottage/Wondering if I would ever live
there/Where I did
move to/It was called Little
Penderleath/Uh/And that's where I
had Yorick /My son/
With Anthony/And then Anthony got a
scholarship to Paris/When Yorick was
about
ten months old/So that was a hard
time

(Benjamin, 2009)

I think it was an old paraffin heater/To have
downstairs/And he said /You mustn't go
upstairs and sleep/Because it was so wet/All
our clothes were mouldy/Covered in
mould/In the cupboards

(Kelley, 2011)

The little house in Street an Pol/And it was
incredibly damp/And in fact it was so
damp/Nathan got pneumonia/In fact he got
bronchitis

(Kelley, 2011)

It was awful/Yes I think it was two pound
fifty a week or something/No I didn't know
anyone/[...]/And I spent most of my time
/Washing nappies/In cold water/And
hanging them up to dry/To freeze/It was a
horribly cold /It was a really bad cold/We
had snow here/It must have been sixty one
or sixty two/Winter of/I'm not sure

(Kelley, 2011)

I came to St Ives on May tenth/ (I remember the
day very well)/1964/It was a Sunday/I came with
my son/My two-year-old son/I came from
Moretonhampstead/In Devon/
The result of a broken marriage/I've been here
ever since/The best place in the
world to be

(Beck, 2009)

Yes well I was a member of the Labour Party/And in those days we used to have jumble sales/There were not charity shops in those days/And/Um/Well Barbara particularly/She just used to ring up and say/Oh I've got some jumble/So I used to go up around to Barbara's/And pick up jumble/And/Um/Then when we had/Um/ Elections and things/We used to have car rallies/Around the town/And Patrick Heron/He used to say/Right I'll come in the lead car/He was on the microphone/ Shouting/There down the microphone/No problem at all/He just adored it

(Beck, 2009)



And we tried to grow anemones/Unsuccessfully/Um/I had Yorick on my back/Picking them/And then at the cottage /The room downstairs/Was full of buckets of anemones/You had to bunch them up/In a shape/You know/To make a proper shape/And tie them up/Put them in the boxes

(Benjamin, 2009)

When I separated from my husband/He stayed up in Malvern/I stayed down here/ And I made cakes and all that for the Copper Kettle

(Lewis, 2009)

Eventually I got in to St Ives Society/Showing my pictures in the gallery there every year/I made a thousand pounds in one year

(Lewis, 2009)

Mind you it wasn't very nice being in there/Some people came in and spat at us and called us dirty reds/And other people came in and said well done and we'll sign the forms/But you know, that's politica...that's politics/You know/Sort of/But/Patrick came in a couple of times/And said how are you getting on/Barbara/Actually she didn't come in/I think she wasn't terribly well at that time/Um/She didn't come down/But Brian did/Her secretary/Came down to see if we were alright/I mean/Very very caring People

(Beck, 2009)

with its emphasis on self-sufficient rural living, offered women unprecedented social freedoms, with the opportunity to live and teach in nontraditional settings, such as cooperative, experimental, or self-initiated communities. Infinitely more private, these off-the-grid situations were more conducive to alternative lifestyles and sexualities, minimizing the social pressure, judgment, and community policing endemic to the sexist and repressive 1950s. Able to barter their unique wares and skill sets, women, too, found varying degrees of financial autonomy in the informal economies of exchange that existed through pottery's social and pedagogical networks.

(Sorkin, 2016:2)