

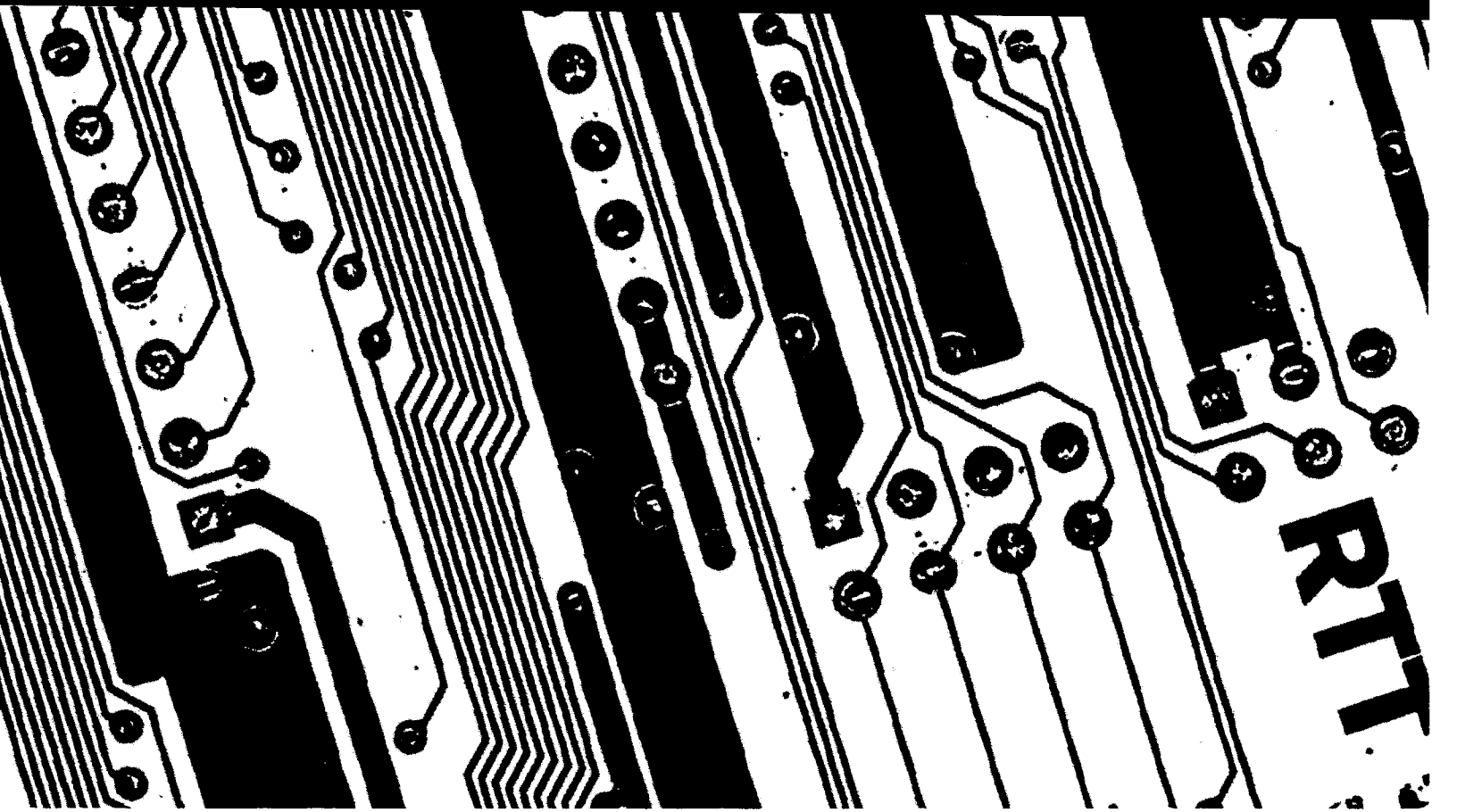
REACHING THROUGH TEACHING

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The Dinner Party, Part II: For Famous Artists: Combining Research and Studio Experience in the Art Appreciation Classroom

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STUDENTS GAIN GREATEST APPRECIATION for visual arts when they explore all the disciplines: art history, criticism, aesthetics, and production, but the challenge of providing positive and meaningful “studio” experience for appreciation students is formidable. Time and space constraints pressure instructors to emphasize “product” at the expense of “process.” A new look at Judy Chicago’s “The Dinner Party” suggested a solution: a student “Dinner Party” to honor artists whose lives have been researched and interpreted in individual place settings.

The original “Dinner Party,” a mixed media installation produced to honor famous women in history, combined years of scholarship and the work of hundreds of artisans to produce a monumental 1979 exhibit that introduced viewers to the accomplishments of female heroes. A dinner table, triangular in shape with sides 48 feet long, supported 39 individual place settings created to honor each guest and to reflect events, influences, and accomplishments in their lives. Under the table, a ceramic “Heritage Floor” recorded the names of 999 additional notable women. Following Ms. Chicago’s famous example, Art Appreciation students host “The Dinner Party, Part II: For Famous Artists” at Southern Polytechnic State University each quarter.

Working in teams, students collaborate by e-mail as they research individual artists using traditional print media, on-line resources, and interactive multimedia titles from the Electronic Gallery of the SPSU Library. Teams then design unique place settings and table runners representative of the artistic style of each guest. The college community joins Art Appreciation students in honoring famous artists by viewing “The Dinner Party, Part II,” a special week-long educational exhibit in the Student Center. Finally, a special “Web site” team recreates the exhibit digitally on the Web for future instruction and enjoyment.

Preparation for “The Dinner Party, Part II” begins with an introductory slide lecture on Chicago’s original installation. Ms. Chicago’s new volume, *The Dinner Party* (1996) by Viking Press, provides an excellent resource for study. The class examines several place settings as reflections of the lives and accomplishments of the guests they honor. The three faces decorating the plate of 19th century abolitionist Sojourner Truth re-

veal the sorrow of slavery, the anger at injustice, and the legacy of African culture. The richly embroidered sun on Hatshepsut’s table runner of Hatshepsut celebrates her reign of ancient Egypt’s 18th dynasty. While acting as interpreter and guide for the Lewis and Clark Expedition, Sacajawea carried her child in a beaded cradleboard similar to the one above her plate; her beaded monogram represents the Indian translation of her name, “Bird woman.” With each example students

