

Casino Capers: Exploring the Aesthetics of Superfluidity

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Casinos are fast becoming sites for display of new Native American (NA) Arts. In such a context, casinos re-represent themselves and their communities through various visual forms and thus change their meanings. In her study of Wisconsin casinos, Stuhr (2004) challenged art educators to consider these visual culture displays as they accommodate new markets. Art in the casino phenomenon is worth investigating and how art educators can explore and/or make sense of this phenomenon is important. Casinos are using artworks as spectacles of pleasure.

According to a casino gambling survey conducted by Harrah's Entertainment, approximately 40 million Americans played slot machines in 2003 (Rivlin, 2004). People are attracted to the glitz and the chance of winning money. Such things are phenomenal—highly sensual and impressive, and there lies the attraction. The gambling experience dates back at least to the casting of lots in the *Bible*. Experience always has an aesthetic component. An aesthetic experience resides not so much in a thing's appearance, as in its life-like substitutes. "In an age in which desire is inculcated even in those who have nothing to buy, the metropolis [casino] becomes the place where the superfluity of objects is converted into a value in and of itself" (Mbembe, 2004, p. 405). So what aesthetic qualities draw people to the casino?

What is a Casino?

A casino is a private establishment that provides an environment for playing games of chance, wherein successful players win money. These point-scoring games usually involve card games, a combination of matching or adding cards exposed on the table with cards in their hands. A casino however offers much more nowadays. It offers an environment in which people can converse, eat, drink coffee/alcohol, play, swim, and enjoy entertainment. Many casinos in Las Vegas, for example, also include gift shops, supermarkets, fashion boutiques, art galleries, and nightclubs. The establishment aims at the visual, gustatory, aural, and taste senses. In all, the environment appeals to all of the senses. With the 1988 passage of the Indian Gaming Regulatory Act, the intervening decades have seen the rapid proliferation of regulated casino gambling and state-run lotteries in the United States. The Indian Gaming Regulatory Act mandated that state governments enter into good-faith negotiations with Indian tribes seeking to operate casinos and high-stakes bingo games. Worried about municipal revenues, states allowed for the expansion of gambling in non-Indian jurisdictions including the so-called interstate games (like Powerball), with multimillion-dollar jackpots (Rizzo, 2004). Such policies thrive on the aesthetics of superfluidity that which is excessive.

Aesthetics of Superfluidity

Aesthetics is a field that incorporates many art theories: expressive, representational, formalistic, and functional, to name a few. In many ways, aesthetics deals with the sensory and emotional experience of “making special” (Dissanayake, 1988). The idea of superfluity is borrowed from Mbembe (2004), who discusses aesthetics in analyzing/interpreting the new architecture in the city of Johannesburg, South Africa. He associates superfluity “with luxury, rarity, and vanity, futility and caprice, conspicuous spectacle, and even phantasm” (p. 378). He discusses the exploitation of a mass of human material in the city. In South Africa, gold was the superfluous raw material and symbol of wealth. The rush for gold, an amazing paradox, was not as significant initially as the pursuit of coal, iron, or rubber (Arendt, 1966). Today, in other casino cultures, the rush is for “the rush itself”—the blast of thrills and escapism that the atmosphere provides.

Phenomenological Gambit

This paper is a phenomenological inquiry, the study of an experience and its layered meanings (Van Manen, 1984). It is an “attempt to somehow capture a phenomenon of life in a linguistic description that is both holistic and analytical, evocative and precise, unique and universal, powerful and sensitive” (Van Manen, 1990, p. 39). Stokrocki collected data via questionnaire, interview around dinner in a casino’s restaurant, email exchanges, and follow-up phone calls. The description started with heightened sensory awareness and proceeded with findings about the casino’s artwork and other cultural components. Discussion of issues associated with casino culture and implications for teaching resulted. Findings are arranged around the major interview questions.

Players. Participants were art teachers and senior adults who gave pseudonyms: LuckyLou (F60); N8tivgrl (F43); Bobo (F43); Dinny (M57), and Marty (M75). Two players were Native American and three players were Caucasian. Three females and two males participated and were members of the Arizona Art Education Association.

Location and time. Casino Arizona is a perfect location, next to Scottsdale, a Southwest tourist haven. The location was easy for us to maneuver since we come from different directions within the desert valley. It has two locations on the Pima/Maricopa Indian Reservation. We chose the casino closest to the university and the highway. The time of day was 6:00 p.m. — after working hours. We were ready for a relaxing time in the air-conditioned building after a long, hot (110°F) summer day and excited about exploring the casino’s aesthetics by discussing the questions below.

Questions and Findings

What are initial reactions to the casino? We each remarked that we were otherwise unlikely ever to visit the casino. Since the Arizona Art Education Association decided to host a conference at a casino this coming fall, we decided that it would be worthwhile to explore the casino’s aesthetic possibilities beforehand. When asked why we went to the casino, we responded: for entertainment, birthdays, professional meetings, or people observation. LuckyLou responded that she went to this casino in a limousine provided by the casino for the annual summer “Women’s Night Out” in her community for adult living.

What is the design of the casino and what are its surface materials? The casino site is laid out in what we decided is an attractive, circular design. The colors emphasized in the building are earth tones, and the most common material is cast concrete, for an appearance similar to adobe. Both smooth and rough stonework contrast each other at the entrance. A constructed waterfall wall prominently screens the entrance. Four medallion relief sculptures mounted on the exterior walls present symbols of life, the four directions, and the man in the maze, the latter of which is the official emblem of the Pima/Maricopa Tribes that own the casino. “The casino is a kind of vernacular oasis, with entrance facing east and a central kiva, according to my architect husband,” explained Bobo. See Figure 1.



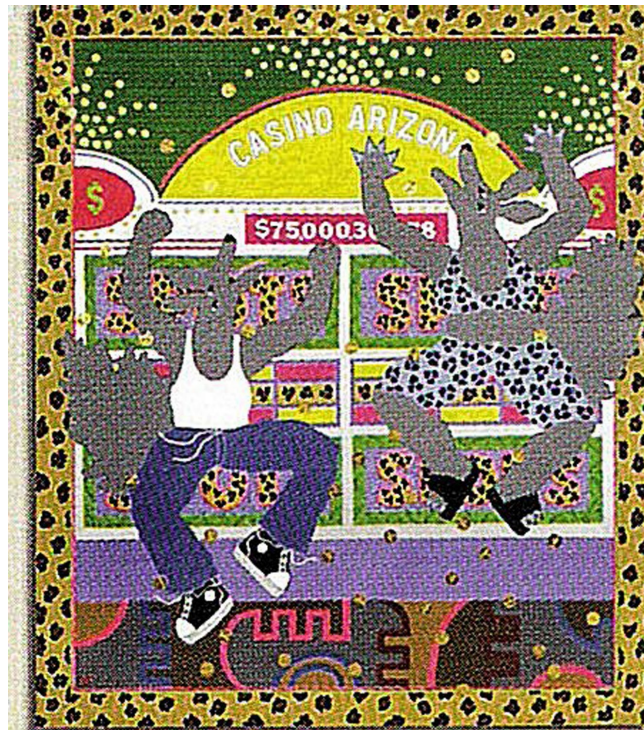
Initial reactions were hyper-sensory. Bobo loved the outside desert oasis that she described as “not too flashy, with willows and even fish.” Later she remarked on its “lush, tropical” charm even though Phoenix is a desert (See Figure 2). The complex had a well-integrated design, we concluded.



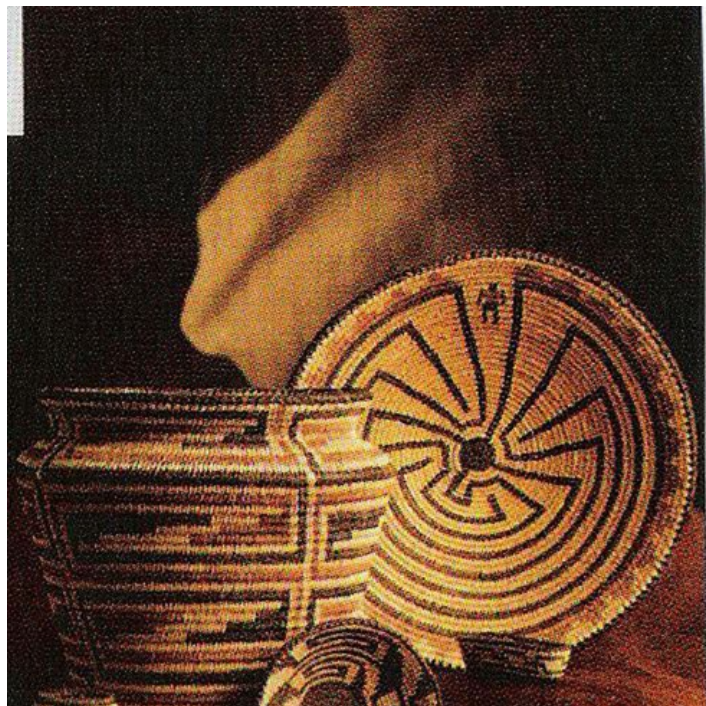
What is your impression of the ambiance of this place? Inside the casino, we first noticed a giant guitar sculpture and thought of Elvis immediately (Figure 3). This sculpture, called *Tribal Caster: Tribal Languages Rocks* by Randy Kemp, was part of “Guitar Mania,” a competition/auction to raise money for the Boys and Girls Clubs. It promised us lots of entertainment.



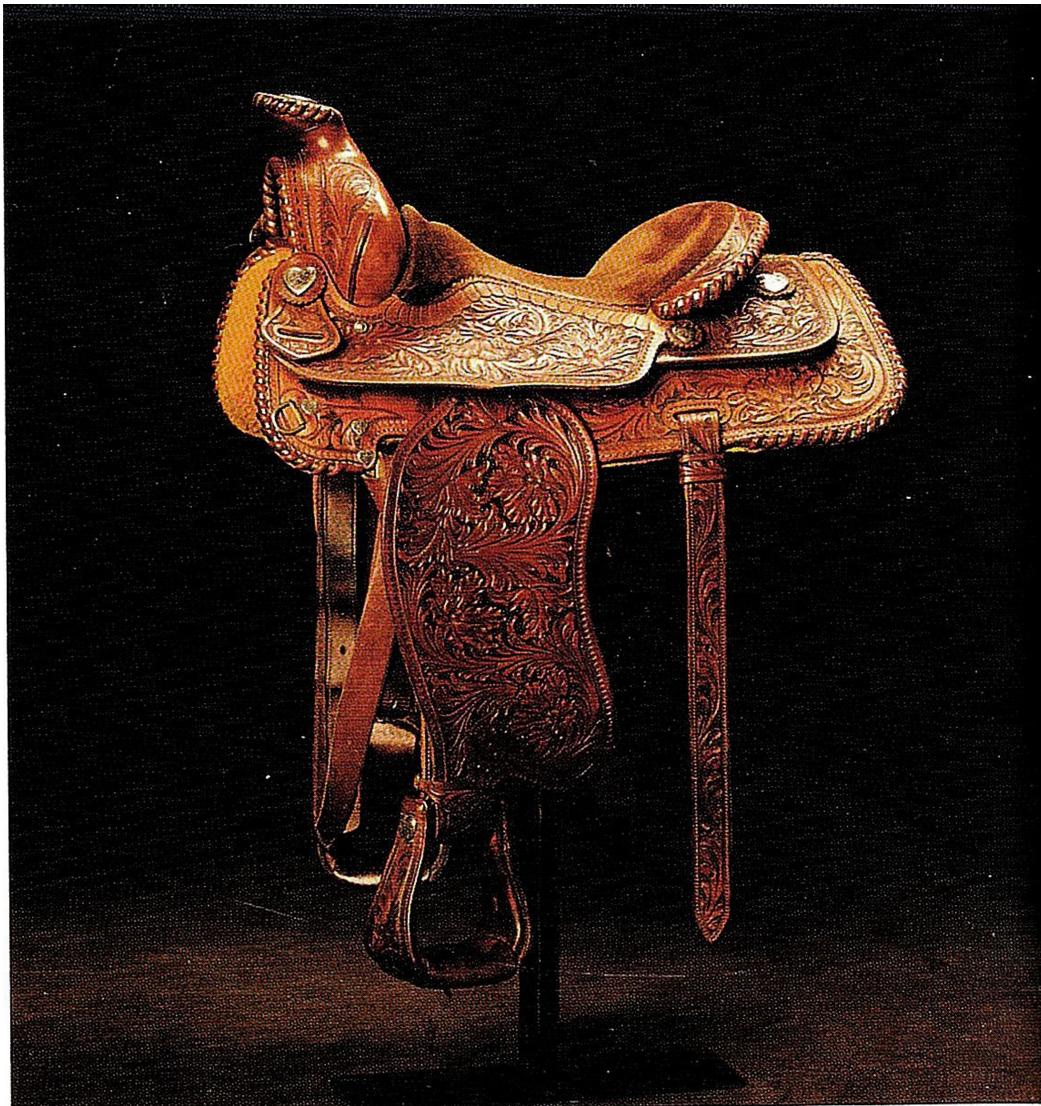
Down the hall, a Harry Fonseca (Maidu People from around Sacramento, California) acrylic, mixed media painting on canvas, called *Leopard Spots*, (2003), attracted Luckylou with “its bright colors and glitter and foil papers.” See Figure 4. *Leopard Spots* celebrates Coyote and his partner Rose as jackpot winners. The coyote is a trickster in many Native American cultures. The casino inspired him and commissioned this piece, based on a popular reel slot machine game, according to Cheryle Vavages, (Personal correspondence, April 12, 2006, Casino Arizona sales representative).



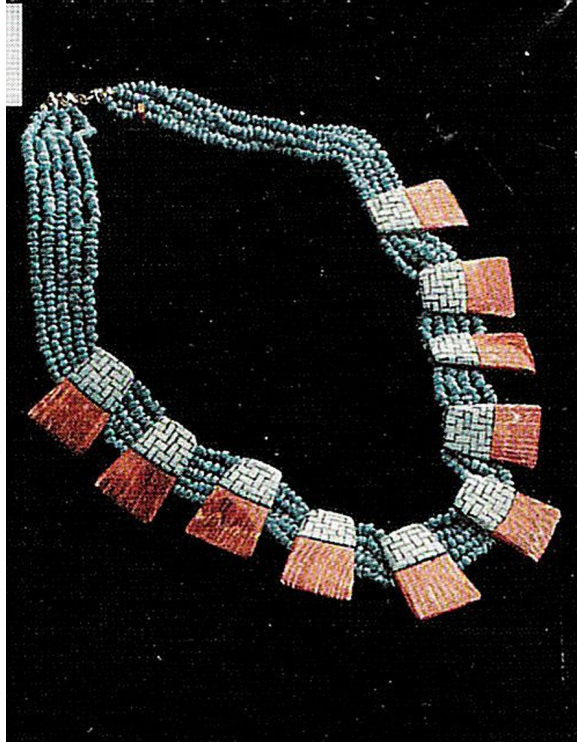
N8tivgrl loved the baskets made of natural local fibers (willow and devil's claw); some of which were just outside the door. She discovered that Pima basket weaving is recognized worldwide as a highly respected tradition. Noteworthy was the man in the maze basket designed by Rikki Franciso, who learned this miniature weaving style from her mother (Casino Arizona's Cultural Arts Collection, Map & Guide, no date). See Figure 5. "Like a prettily wrapped present, we were impressed by its potential to please," remarked Dinney. The subdued lighting immediately relaxed us.



What artwork inside the building is special? Players may not be conscious of the artworks on the walls. My informants, in contrast, willingly shared their perceptions. The textured artworks caught the attention of our group. Bobo liked the smooth “square-shaped bodies” of the 1997 butterfly ceramic figures by Nora Naranjo-Morse (Santa Clara Pueblo). She appreciated the form because “it was different.” Lucklou admired *Richard Boone’s Rose Parade Saddle*, c. 1965, by Mervin Ringlero (Pima), a master saddle maker. The saddle consisted of hand-tooled cowhide, suede, and sterling silver See Figure 6. In 1991, he was described as a “living treasure” by the State of Arizona. His intricate construction and custom design is unique in the Cowboy and the Gene Autry Museum of Western Heritage, according to Casino Arizona’s Cultural Arts Collection Map & Guide.



Dinny loved the built-in wall vitrine containing old Navajo rugs, baskets, and Pima jewelry. On display was Angie Reano-Owens’s mosaic shell necklace (Figure 7). The Pima People resurrected the ancient Hohokom-style of piercing and stringing brilliant turquoise stones and ocean shells that continues today.



The artworks lend an atmosphere of “high quality” to the place, whispered Dinny. The Casino Gift Store also sold some of the local Maricopa pottery and featured a local artist online. Later, we learned that “this is one of the largest casino collections of Native American art in the United States (Salt River Pima-Maricopa Indian Community, 2000-2001).

What pleasures does the casino offer? The possibility of winning big, entertainment, and lots of stimulation in the meantime usually were main casino attractions. Stimulation included “the noise, flashing lights (BB), and air conditioning in the summer which offered a “cool respite” (Luckylou). Dinny suggested, “It’s usually a din of jangling sounds and active light displays at slot machines.” A security guard explained how a person distinguishes the levels of slot machines. She noted, “The red lights are nickel machines; the yellow denotes quarter slots; and the blue lights are dollar games.” Dinny considered the slot machines as art objects consisting of “chromed metal/plastic, back lit signage, high gloss enamel paint, moving parts that include a pull lever and buttons to push, and rolling cylinder markers with symbols to match up for awards.” He pointed out that the casino interior emphasized variegated bright color and metal, high gloss, and reflective surfaces. ‘

What were favorite slot machines? None of us cared about “the slots.” We discovered from random players that the one arm bandit, playing two machines at times, and bingo were favorite casino games. Playing Bingo brought back memories of family games and church bazaars. Similar to television viewing, *Wheel of Fortune*, based on powerful gambit of “the near miss,” is the most popular slot machine with senior citizens (Rivlin, 2004). The center of attention in this slot machine hall was a *Wheel of Fortune* extravaganza with a horizontal spinning table, swirling wheels in the middle, two vertical spinning wheels on the either side, and lots of lights flickering at different speeds. See Figure 8.



Players sat around it and a chorus of noises accompanied this machine. Onlookers surrounded this area as they might at a carnival. Slot machines are the undisputed king of casino gambling, according to Bill Eadington, Director of the Institute for the Study of Gambling and Commercial Gaming at the University of Nevada, Reno (Rivlin, 2004). Poker and black jack, however, are the most popular card games because they challenge participants' diagrammatic reasoning or spatial mapping abilities involved in card playing.

What entertainment is featured? We learned about the weekly entertainment that consists of Showstoppers Live—musical impersonations of such America's superstar legends as Elvis, Madonna, Tina Turner, and The Temptations. The Calendar of Events included Tanya Tucker (May), Little River Band (June), and Restless Heart (August), 2006. Lucklou found the Italian ventriloquist with his talking parrot "delightfully raunchy." Special Events consisted of the Chippendales, Indian Art Market and Powwow, Monday Night Comedy Cub, Polka Night with a Touch of Chicago, Boogie Nights, and tons of giveaways. During the summer, the casino offered several spectacular events (Arizona Player Gaming and Entertainment Guide, 2006).

What is tasteful/tasteless about the casino? The group discovered the food was tasty and well presented in the circular-shaped restaurant, painted with pleasant desert green colors. Luckylou ordered a pasta salad that consisted luckily of a lot of greens and tomatoes for a healthy diet. Bobo really enjoyed her steak, which she rarely eats otherwise. No doubt about it—the food was an inexpensive, gustatory delight. At dinner, we appreciated the low "Cool Jazz" music in the background. Yet we bemoaned the act of gambling itself and the waste of resources and money, the food waste, the ubiquitous tobacco smoke, and the money drain. Other seductions were embedded or hidden. On another occasion, one of my colleagues noted the slot machine "Risky Business" at an entrance that featured a stripper in full view of the crowd. She commented, "I'm not a prude, but this is flamboyantly crude."

Conclusions and Discussion

Our weekday visit to the Casino Arizona proved to be relaxing and educational, so its timing may have resulted in a reduction of noise, smoke, and we can only speculate, other unappealing behaviors. We concluded that in this casino there was not much superfluidity, such as high-stakes craps or roulette or extravagant merchandise at the gift shop.

No one gambled, but we learned about classic forms, such as Baccarat, Blackjack, craps, War, Roulette, including those online (Real Vegas Online, 2006). LuckyLou remembered her dad teaching her and her sisters to play poker as children. We discovered that the site was surprisingly appealing to us as art educators with its muted lighting, regulated noise, and cool atmosphere. This trip turned out to be an exception to the view that casino experience is superfluous. Then too, we remembered that there is more here than meets the senses. A major contrast existed between the earthy traditional Native American arts and the contemporary flashy casino chromed arts. The animated chromed slot machine installations contribute to the lure of the spectacle (Garoian & Gaudelius, 2004). Behind the scenes, complex psychological calculations control gambling. The idea of superfluidity denotes loud and bright as opposed to passive and restrained. The system is highly complex and not as simple as it seems.

Several health problems are related to gambling. Participants complained of smoking as the major unpleasant problem with casinos. Many sites now have no-smoking sections and smoke extractors to control the problem. Of course, alcohol is a second problem we noted and bouncers and undercover agents watch players for signs of aggression. Casinos even offer to pay for cabs so that players will not drive while intoxicated. Psychological problems of addiction are fluent. And slots are the “the crack cocaine of gambling” (Rivlin, 2004). Therapists watch people for “telescoping—a shortening of the period of time that it takes for someone to get into trouble,” according to Volberg (2001), President of the National Council on Problem Gambling. Even the gaming industry is worried that its players are burning out too fast. Gambling has become one of the fashionable psycho stimulants.

Dinny found a news article on the brilliant design of slot machines from a behavioral psychology perspective. Petry (Rivlin, 2004), a professor of psychiatry at the University of Connecticut School of Medicine notes, “People who are making these machines are using all the behavioral techniques to increase the probability that the behavior of gambling will reoccur” (p. 7). She referred to intermittent reward as “second-order conditioning” -- the trigger lights and sounds that go off when a player wins. When two cherries in a row appear on the screen or stereo speakers project satisfying clink of cascading cash, they signal to people that they’re getting closer to winning. “It is the dumbing-down of America, because gamblers won’t try to figure out the game strategies any more,” complains Marty. Colleagues of Shaffer have compared the brain scans of people high on cocaine with those of people while gambling: similar neurocircuitry lights up in both sets of images (Rivlin, 2004). All this points to the aesthetics of speed that gives one a heightened sense of perception and a restless, voracious, and transformative passion for a high-speed life-style, “where love is a motion faster than light and the paradoxes of empiricism swamp science in motion without mobility’ (Virilio, 1991). Gambling is reversing roles—a stimulant for some and a relaxant for others that poses physical, psychological, intellectual, and even existential problems.

Racial Distinctions

The predominant race of gamblers was Caucasian, but it was our observation that about

20% of the local Pima/Maricopa people played the slot machines or worked there because the casino was on the Pima- Maricopa reservation. In addition, N8tivgrl noticed other distinctive signs of "Indianness" at the casino. She noted, "The staff who wore Indian beadwork lanyards are Native People." Later, she remarked, "The Native American message I think that is being sent is 'We are strong, we are moving forward into the future'." The display of traditional and contemporary Native art was deliberate to suggest that the tribe has deep roots in the past, but is vital and growing into the future. Also, the elegance of the casino was a way to combat stereotypes held of Native People as "dirty, unintelligent, and without culture." She summarized, "We have our culture, but we also have the ability to work our culture successfully with what is considered 'refined and cultured' by mainstream society." Oneidan Ernest Stevens, Chair of National Indian Gaming Association, mentioned some successes of Indian gaming as elderly and day care facilities/programs for kids and the spread of new golf courses on the Gila River Indian Community, south of Phoenix. In reference to helping Native People become self-sufficient, he said, "If it's good for Indian Country, it's good for the states, and good for the nation" (Gibson, 2007, p. 48).

Gender Peculiarities

Females seemed to be attracted to the slot machines that featured "flashing lights, bells and whistles," according to an anonymous player. Marty confessed that the classic and plain slot machines, like *Red, White, and Blue*, were just fine for him. LuckyLou noted that gender was separated with females mostly on the slots and males at the card games and poker tables. In fact, the typical male seemed to be oblivious to the artworks. One anonymous male gambler, sitting on a stool at the casino, responded incorrectly that the artwork was traditionally Asian. Obviously, people of both sexes usually ignore the artwork, but pay attention to the multi-sensory stimulants.

Age Differences

On the Tuesday night that we visited this casino, we noted that most of the people were senior citizens. Rivlin (2004) called casinos "day care for the elderly," or adult arcades. We would have to come on a weekend to discover the younger "working class crowd," and the fights over the slot machines." The problem for people is not only in the casino, but online gambling, where families and friends can spend hours playing and drinking in the comfort of their own homes (Krigman, 2000). Different forms of gambling, even as art works [slot machine design], are creeping online and into our lives. Online gambling is becoming a competitive sport because of its speed of delivery and fast movements. Art educators will need to pay attention to the aesthetics of superfluidity at all levels.

Art Education Implications

Similar to Stuhr (2004), we agree that art education now deals with lifelong learning and the casinos are rich sites for the display of Native People's traditional and contemporary art works. Like Stuhr, we discovered that the Casino failed to display local Native artworks. Most of the works were from several native groups. Putting Native People's [NP] artwork in their casinos is supposed to give them more exposure, but we noticed that casino players fail to attend to the artworks and their explanations are of poor quality. Is this positioning of the Native Americans a kind of mere decoration or cultural tourism with its museum-like façade without the original context? The aesthetics of superfluidity is based on the idea that

more is best, but there are differences depending on the socio-economic conditions of time, place, race, gender, and age. Our experience at the casino of the NP artwork was rich because of our preparatory backgrounds, but the casino voyeur seems to have a cursory exposure and will pay little attention to the artworks. Even though the aesthetic of superfluidity demands close attention to card numbers and matching icons, casino visitors' attention does not seem to transfer to NP artworks.

Because artwork in casinos usually is fake; e.g., the casino art in Las Vegas (Congdon & Blandy, 2001), participants may question the authenticity of the art pieces. Freedman (2003) spoke of the transformation of art influenced by context. She referred to casinos where "every cultural citation is fake so real things feel out of place" (Hughes, 1999 p. 51). An exhibition "*Exotic Illusions: Art, Romance and the Marketplace*" at the Heard Museum (1991) in Phoenix showcased several definitions of authenticity; namely the anthropological view. When taken to its extreme, every work is 'authentic,' as it is a cultural artifact. Native people can decide for themselves what is authentic in their eyes. Art educators need to help students of all ages become more attentive to NP artworks, enable them to problematize their contexts [former and present], and find alternative ways to engage Native American artworks, even in the casinos, lest they remain superfluous for most people. The casino experience may deal with superfluous things, but the artworks are not the objects getting the attention.

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Figure 1. The casino logo we discovered denotes two rivers (Salt and Gila) and three elements: river, land, and wind.

Figure 2. Later Bobo remarked on the casino's "lush, tropical" charm even though Phoenix is a desert.

Figure 3. This sculpture, called *Tribal Caster: Tribal Languages Rocks* by Randy Kemp, was part of "Guitar Mania," a competition/auction to raise money.

Figure 4. Harry Fonseca (Maidu People from around Sacramento, California) acrylic, mixed media painting on canvas, called *Leopard Spots*, 2003.

Figure 5. Pima basket weaving with man in the maze basket designed by Rikki Franciso.

Figure 6. Saddle consisted of hand-tooled cowhide, suede, and sterling silver by Mervin Ringlero (Pima).

Figure 7. Angie Reano-Owens's mosaic shell jewelry.

Figure 8. The center of attention in this slot machine hall was a Wheel of Fortune spectacle