What is my role as a Deaf artist in a predominantly hearing culture, one which includes the art world? How does my being Deaf affect my work, artistic and otherwise? To what degree has American Sign Language [ASL] and Deaf culture shaped my art? Can I separate Deaf Art from my work? Why do I want to pursue Deaf Art? Does my being a Deaf artist ghettoize me in a negative way in the art world? If it were not for ASL, would there have been an art movement and an art genre germane to the Deaf Experience?

Born genetically Deaf to a hearing family and reared in a town where ASL was strictly verboten, I was blessed with art as a native language -- for it enabled me to communicate with the hearingfolk through crayons.
long before I acquired other languages, namely English and ASL. Does that make me trilingual?

In my youth, I used art as a means to escape from the oppressive world of speech, lipreading and auditory training. My early education was 90% guesswork and 10% art because support services such as professional notetaking and ASL interpreting were non-existent throughout my public school years.

My introduction to Deaf Art came around 1962 when I saw a painting by Morris Broderson. His work had a myriad of colors, and at the bottom of the painting there were small handshapes in the form of fingerspelled letters “T-H-O-R-E-A-U.” I was completely zapped, frightened and fascinated all at once. Remember my saying earlier that ASL was forbidden in my hometown? I found it bizarre that his painting was hanging in the office of the executive director of the Seattle Hearing and Speech Center. I was about 13 years of age when I had that life-altering experience: my first exposure to Deaf Art. I wasn’t even aware until in college that the legendary artist was deaf like me despite the fact that he refused to be known as a “Deaf artist.” In a psychic sense Broderson’s work gave me permission to pursue a Deaf-based art genre. Like a cow being branded with an hot-iron, that indelible memory stayed with me to this day.

When I came to Gallaudet College (now University) in Washington DC in 1968, I learned about Deaf artists from classmates and Deaf teachers who themselves had connected with notable artists before them. The two most important cultural brokers were Harry R. Williams, my classmate and sidekick, and Dr. Deborah M. Sonnenstrahl, my art history professor. They enchanted me with stories of Deaf artists of the earlier day. It was like a tunnel back into a past that I would otherwise have known from books and those books just weren’t being written. There is a whole “oral” history, traditions and perspectives that you can inherit from those relationships. For a lot of Deaf people, the Deaf-World becomes that ancestral lineage network where customs, values and beliefs are passed along. I credit Williams and Sonnenstrahl with sowing my lifelong interest in Deaf Art history.

While majoring in advertising art, I hated the college art department. I always fought with the teachers because they would not let me do what I wanted to do: create Deaf Art. Inspired in part by Dr. William C. Stokoe Jr.’s discovery in 1960 of ASL as a legitimate academic inquiry, I sought legitimacy of Deaf Art both as an art genre and as an academic subject. As an undergraduate, my front-line exposure to ethno-art movements -among them African-American Art, Feminist Art, and Lesbian/Gay Art -shaped my consciousness and provided a blueprint for the Deaf Art movement during the 1960s-1970s.

My classmates from the “Class of 1972” -- Harry R. Williams, John Darcy Smith, John Canady (all three now deceased) and I embraced the idea of a Deafcentric art culture, incorporating visual elements, mannersisms, codes and imagery based on the Deaf Experience. The student-based movement came on the heels of the Deaf Pride activism. The Deaf Art Movement [DAM], however small, was an assault not only on the oppressive roots of the larger art world but also on our art department. In a sense, the DAM was a precursor to the “Deaf President Now!” [DPN] movement and the “De’VIA” [Deaf View/Image Art] movement of the late 1980s. Because of the oppressive climate within the art department, several art majors, sympathizers and I demanded a right to express art the “Deaf Way.” Incidentally, the push for an art culture of our own, which was suppressed by our teachers, was recorded on 8mm film I made as part of my independent study.

Just before graduation, I accepted Gallaudet’s job offer as a sign language book designer/researcher. Four years later, I left the campus and moved to New York City to attend New York University. While studying for my Master’s Degree in Deaf-based Vocational Rehabilitation, I toiled for Harper & Row Publishers as an ASL dictionary illustrator. Whereas Gallaudet provided me with a rich foundation in ASL/Deaf culture, New York City gave me a solid framework in the visual arts.

Throughout the course of my life, the language of art metamorphosed from pictorial grammar to creativity and critical thinking. I turn to art [1] as an artistic expression of the Deaf Experience i.e., culture, language, identity and heritage; [2] as a Zen meditation and an aesthetic recreation of the contemplative state in which it allows my thoughts to drift by without grasping at them; [3] as academic study vis-à-vis Deaf Studies; and [4] as a visual weapon to deal with polemic issues and concerns such as bias, stereotyping, inaccessibility, paternalism, inequality and discrimination on the basis of hearing status a.k.a. audism, a word coined by Tom Humphries (1977).
Ann Silver is a self-taught artist who works in a variety of styles and media. Whimsical and thought-provoking, shaped by Pop Art, civil rights activism and Zen Buddhism, she is one of the most influential artists of Deaf Art. The Seattle resident is collaborating with an architectural firm in Vancouver to merge architecture and Deaf culture on a grand scale.
I refuse to be labeled as a "handicapped/disabled" [sic] artist, "an artist who happens to be hearing-impaired" [sic], or "an artist who cannot hear or speak." (See Fig. 1). I am a Deaf artist, and that’s how I want to be identified.

Part of being an artist is having a sense of who you are being an artist for; it’s a worldview. Similarly, being Deaf has formed my worldview and my worldview is always in my work, even when my subject isn’t ASL or Deaf culture. Being Deaf has always been a critical part of what it means to me to be an artist; it has so much to do with being on the outside. I think the fact that I am Deaf and that ASL is my primary form of communication helps make my artwork interesting. It all works together: my work is really art and art is really about identity -- and identity, for me, is really about being Deaf. People often ask me if my “deafness” [sic] influenced my work. I’d be lying if I say that it doesn’t affect my perceptions and experiences. I do believe that being Deaf makes me acutely visual whether I do artwork or not. Being born profoundly Deaf sharpens my perceptions toward things around myself on a daily basis. My total reliance on sight and my observations of things Deaf add significant dimensions to my sensibilities.
Top: Fig. 4. "Deaf Children Area: Do Not Enter" (1992/mixed-media).
Right: Fig. 5. "Deaf Children Area: No Cochlear-Implanting Beyond This Point" (1992/mixed-media).
Just how can I be a Deaf artist in a hearing art world and not have a Deaf identity? How can I be a woman in a man’s world and not have femaleness? How can I be a member in a world of diversity and not have a cultural-linguistic (minority) status? While issues of oppression/disempowerment in addition to reaffirmation of cultural pride and identity are emphasized in my work, some of my work can transcend cultural differences or boundaries. Each piece presents an universality in its theme with which all cultures can identify (See Fig. 2).

Being an artist, art historian, writer or researcher can be tough in a competitive art market or academia. Being a Deaf artist compounds that difficulty. I am one of the many Deaf artists who face discrimination on all levels of funding, patronage, exhibition, and employment. In this supposedly enlightened day and age, I continue to face subtle and blatant barriers on a daily basis: inequality, communication inaccessibility, language control, stereotyping, marginalization and everything else that falls under audism. An example of the current double standard practice among agencies, organizations and foundations is my state Vocational Rehabilitation agency. DVR repeatedly refused to provide financial assistance for my doctoral studies in Deaf Art, yet furnished PhD support to a non-deaf client. Consequently, my doctoral work came to a crashing end.

I am obviously not one of the artists who lead calm, ordered lives. No matter how you look at my work -- protest art, political satire, victim art or graphic wit. I do not shy away from ethical questions or controversy. Part of my mission is to dislocate hearing-centric perceptions, practices and paradigms. Standing up to hearing paternalists is a long-standing social taboo within the Deaf community. I have often had to endure consequences whenever I put in my two cents’ worth for objecting to what I find to be unethical, inhumane, or unprofessional. More frightening than having the freedom to speak out is not having the freedom to speak out (See Fig. 3).

From time to time, I have experienced censorship by viewers who find my work objectionable. A case in point: at the art show in conjunction with the 1993 Deaf Studies III National Conference in Chicago, two hearing persons removed some of my 20 displayed works. Among the pieces in question dealt with anti-cochlear implant sentiments (See Fig. 4 and 5).

"Deaf" is the *raison d'être* of my artwork: my work embodies a certain kind of Deaf sensibility. Though my work runs a broad gamut, my masterworks are poster art (most notably the *RoadSigns* series and mail art. Whether the assignment involves graphics, poster art, logo design or greeting cards, I bring a Deafcentric consciousness to my work. My images, symbols, icons, codes, and text call to mind the language, culture, and history of Deaf people. Given the nature of my work,
Fig. 7. "Classic Deaf Labels" (1986/ink drawing).

Fig. 8. "WASHINGTON ASLTA Logo" (1999/technical/ink drawing)
Fig. 9. "Sign Language Accessibility Logo" (1979/technical ink drawing).

Above: Fig. 10. "New York DeafTheatre/NYDT Logo" (1976/technical ink drawing).
Right: Fig. 11. "American Association of the Deaf-Blind/AADB Logo" (1980/technical ink drawing).
Fig. 12. "Deaf Studies State Meanings. Deaf Art Expresses Them" (1992/mixed-media).
my true following has been the Deaf, interpreting, and CODA (children of d/Deaf adults) communities.

Because people have become intolerant of a 400-page book, they seek forms of communication that are more efficient and immediate. For that reason, I use street, parking, and warning signs as an intermediary to attract attention and to remove misconceptions about Deaf people that have been largely shaped by educational and vocational rehabilitation systems and other means through which the majority culture receive information. As labeling and terminology define everything in a verbal society, my RoadSigns series serves as an instant education for the uninitiated. In Journey to the DEAF-WORLD (1996, DawnSign Press), Dr. Harlan Lane writes "Ann Silver's witty and arresting poster art capitalizes on the evocative powers of road signs and other familiar objects to send messages about Deaf culture and Deaf studies." If my work can shape cultural consciousness and popular opinion in ways that statistical reports, legal action, and systems cannot, then I have accomplished something.

In addition to creating provocative informational/directional signs, I take pleasure in parodying well-known brands, packaged food, household products, and popular advertisements. By merging Pop Art and Deaf culture, my work is Deaf Pop Art (See Fig. 6).

One of the purposes of cartooning is to undermine a set of beliefs, opinions and ideas of a person or group. Cartoons can be a wonderful propaganda tool and a visual weapon to draw readers’ attention to an issue, event, experience and need; to influence public opinion; and to get people to confront them. Similarly, Deaftooning offers me unlimited possibilities to address Deaf-related issues in humorous, educational or sarcastic ways (See Fig. 7). Teachers should encourage students to develop both an appreciation of and critical thinking toward visual humor related to the Deaf Experience.

Given my advertising art background, I am attracted to graphic symbology — how each logo or trademark presents itself with brevity, readability, and visual impact. For Deaf organizations, I bilingualize my logo/trademark designs by incorporating Deaf-based elements. Take the Washington American Sign Language Teachers Association (WASHINGTON ASLTA) logo for example: the graphic symbol includes fingerspelling to correspond with the English letters A-S-L-T-A (See Fig. 8). My other culturally-identified visual symbols can be found in prestigious graphic design textbooks (See Fig. 9, Fig. 10, and Fig. 11).

For me, balancing the yin of Deaf Studies and the yang of Deaf Art is no easy task. In addition to creating art, my independent scholarly research represents the visual arts wing of the Deaf Studies spectrum. Part of my work deals with the intimacy between the two interdisciplinaries, as well as Deaf Studies/Deaf Art within the context of mainstream cultural studies and art history (See Fig. 12). When marketing ASL or Deaf culture, it is essential that Deaf Studies be promoted not only academically but also aesthetically.

One of my greatest challenges as a Deaf artist has been making Deaf Art’s presence absolutely visible, saving such a "species" from extinction. After a 30-year art world exile, Deaf Art has finally moved from a neglected backwater to the epicenter of Deaf sensibility. Deaf Art has always been a large part of my life, but now my life is Deaf Art. Deaf Art is my soul, my heart, my conscience.