

Conference as Ritual: The Sacred Journey of the Art Educator

Under the co-ordinated efforts of Amy Brook Snider, Chair of Art Education at the Pratt Institute of Art, Brooklyn, N.Y., Harold Pearse, Chair of Art Education at the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, Canada, and Cynthia Taylor also of NSCAD, a mini conference was held under the sponsorship of the Social Theory Caucus at the National Conference in Los Angeles, 1988. The self-examination of the conference ritual had its genesis with Amy Brook Snider's insight of the parallels between the NAEA's annual spring pilgrimage to various hotels in the United States and Barbara Myerhoff's description of the Huichol Indians in her book *Peyote Hunt*. Not all the members of this mini conference are represented in the pages which follow. This, in itself is no doubt telling and harbors its own story. Interesting insights were also offered by James N. Stewart on the history and development of the conference in art education and Maurice Sevigny, Chair of the Department of Art at the University of Texas at Austin whose analysis of secret societies, private customs, rituals and practices at the NAEA Convention was a rare glimpse into its hidden corridors.

It will become readily apparent to the reader what the purpose and intent of this self-examination was. The opening essay by Amy Brook Snider is an introduction to the essays which follow. These range from acid social criticism to outright satire and humour. There are as many Voices of interpretation as there were participants, yet one is struck by the way the conference is *written*, tattooed on each body, worn in permanence.

As a collection of essays, *The Conference as Ritual* exemplifies what many postmodern anthropologists like Stephen Tyler (*The Unspeakable: Discourse, Dialogue, and Rhetoric in the Postmodern World*) and James Clifford (*The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth-Century Ethnography, Literature, and Art*) have written: all ethnographies are rhetorical performances determined by the need to tell an effective story. Ideology and desire can never be reconciled with the needs of theory and observation. The issue remains as one of representation and the question dwells always in the background: whose representation is *written* as the truth? -*editor*

Here's Looking at Us Looking at Us

AMY BROOK SNIDER

This paper was an introduction to the mini-conference, "The Conference as Ritual: The Sacred Journey of the Art Educator," organized by Harold Pearse, Cynthia Taylor and myself for the NAEA Convention in Los Angeles, April 1988. Art educators from Canada and the United States along with Dr. Michael Owen Jones, author and director of the Folklore and Mythology Center at UCLA (our non-participant observer) looked at our annual spring pilgrimage to various hotels in the United States from historical, psychological, philosophic, structural and ethnographic perspectives.

As the introduction to the mini-conference, my paper specifically recounts the ways that I, an individual presenter, have tried to break out of the ritual forms of presentation through the years.

Rituals separated specified members of a group from everyday life, placed them in a limbo that was not any place they were in before and not yet any place they would be in, then returned them, changed in some way, to mundane life" (Turner, 1986, p.25).

We sit for hours in the windowless rooms of expensive hotels with fountains, flocked wallpaper, oversized plants, franchised boutiques, and muzak in the lobbies; we sleep surrounded by tasteless furnishings and tacky art reproductions; we eat low quality, high-priced meals in fancy restaurants. It is Spring in Los Angeles, and today Friday, April 8, 1988 marks the beginning of the 28th annual National Art Education Association Convention. Why do we travel hundreds and sometimes thousands of miles each year to listen to papers which we could read in the comfort of our living rooms or lay on our hands in workshops which we could attend much closer to home?

How does this annual ritual function in our professional lives? When we "present" ourselves to each other, what are we accomplishing? What shared assumptions, beliefs or myths unite us? Which are the symbols that condense and evoke our sense of what art and teaching means?

Art is not an integral part of our culture; fine art, popular art forms, and folk art even when accessible, are not connected with the aesthetic dimension in our lives. We are purveyors of what society does not value. Undaunted we strive for instrumental arguments, claim grounding in a four part discipline, lobby the politicians, invent catchy slogans for shopping bags, publish countless pamphlets listing our aims, and develop scientific evaluation instruments. Like unknown salesmen, we clamour for recognition. We are tireless in our efforts to validate an experience, a discipline, a mode of knowing, a vehicle for self-definition, a career.

Like any band of outsiders, we fight amongst ourselves. Our Conference structure appears to allow for diversity as it creates and reinforces a consensus from our constituency. The format we have created is, as in all rituals, rigid. It has the power to constrict, expand, and distort our content. Our time frame is fixed; like the old radio soap operas, we measure our words on the quarter and half hour. We send in our proposals without knowing the criteria for inclusion. With experience, we discover tricks to guarantee a place in the program. We read without time for response; there is usually no relation to what came before or what will follow. We rarely collaborate since we are separated by busy lives and enormous distances. For visuals, even our best and our brightest rely on the "portable" slide. It seems that we are least concerned with the art part, that is, the formal character of our performance in front of our peers.

Ritual may be likened to a vessel into which anything may be poured: an order-endowing device, it gives shape to its contents" (Myerhoff, 1979, p. 86).

Often we are looking for affirmation and professional identity. When we select sessions to attend, we usually pick those individuals or points of view with whom or with which we are already in agreement. We applaud those presenters who seem to read our minds. The categories on the Convention Proposal Application serve both to reinforce our sense of belonging and help maintain our separateness: Early Childhood, Elementary, Middle/Jr. High, Gifted/Talented, Higher Education, Museum Education, Supervision, Administration, Student Interest, Theoretical Concept, Research, Instruction in Studio, Art History, Criticism, and Aesthetics, DBAE, and the Caucuses (Social Theory, Women's, Minority Concerns, Public Policy).

My interest in the self-reflexive activity that we are engaged in today began I suppose in childhood when I was consumed with a desire to know all the missing details of the stories unfolding in my family, my apartment house, my classroom, and my neighborhood. My oft-repeated question, "What was he wearing?" became a family joke.

So, nine years ago, I, a participant observer since my early years, went to my first National Art Education Association Conference in San Francisco. For a few years, the experience was so overwhelming that I never considered presenting. I went home every year with a sense of confusion, with pieces that never seemed to fit together. But as I reflect upon my subsequent

history as a presenter, a picture of my developing vocation as a deconstructionist begins to emerge as well as an understanding of my attraction to the work of people in the unaffiliated Women's Caucus and the Social Theory Caucus.

My first presentation was during a snow storm in New York. I brought a ton of books, tapes, slides, and a shopping cart in a taxi. Only about 6 or 7 of my friends came to what turned into a kind of a relaxed 'show and tell' about my work with untrained elderly painters. It was not an auspicious beginning.

I was also Chair of the Exhibition Committee. This is where my active critique of the Convention probably started. The formula was simple - many rectangular-shaped pictures of varying quality with different frames and mats and no relation to each other except that they are all by children. The exhibition is installed on spindly, aluminum panels tottering on their perches, viewed *en passant* on the way to somewhere else. One would think that original art by children would be the *raison d'être* of an art education conference. Our committee tried to get an actual gallery space outside the hotel but settled for a narrated two projector presentation with slides we had collected in response to ten specific problems.

My second foray was a collaborative performance in Miami, "To Read, or Not to Read: Presenting at Professional Conferences." We used slides of quotations by a film-maker, an anthropologist, an artist, and a scientist, as well as a puppet moved by a magnet, and a questionnaire for the audience on the the environment of conference rooms.

Even the Women's Caucus, which organized their sessions around the theme of gender, offered the same mixed bag with little coherence other than the familiar faces and themes of the membership. The College Art Association invites individual members to develop panels about controversial issues in art and art history. Expanding this model into a mini-conference I now had a vehicle for posing questions like "Is Style in Art Education a Question of Gender?" Next, I outlined several sessions using a variety of formats involving both visible or "mainstream" art educators as well as invisible or "hiddenstream" art educators (cf. Collins and Sandell, 1984), and as many strata of the membership as possible - men and women, administrators, art teachers, museum educators, college professors and school supervisors.

Before the Dallas Conference, it occurred to me that local women artists might be interested in discussing their work with the Women's Caucus, and the following year, in New Orleans, an interview with painter and sculptor, Ida Kohlmeyer proved an even more effective sequel for our traditional slide-chairing sessions.

In "Teaching as Story-Telling," I began to experiment with the uses of autobiography. It was but a short step to organizing a panel with other autobiographers in our field. For my most recent talk at the Canadian Society of Education Through Art Conference, Herb Perr and I brought a dozen loaves of fresh rye bread from the Lower East Side in New York City to Halifax, Nova Scotia and reflected upon our identity as Jewish art educators.

I am obviously trying to redress the neglect of the formal considerations in our conference structures. What we say here in our Convention

rooms should only be part of the story. The context and form of our presentations can have a profound effect on their potential impact. The conference is ours to modify or transform. It is the only way to make our time in these meeting rooms as exciting and stimulating as those moments we spend with each other exchanging ideas and gossiping in the corridors and over lunch.

... we can work so that the theater of our thought reveals both our conviction and our doubt, as well as our inevitable duplicities. Those aesthetic forms that present their own contradictions without containing them in comforting resolutions, are the ones that constitute great theater (Grumet, 1986, p. 86).

References

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Outsiders and Taboo Subjects: The Horseflies of Art Education

KAREN A. HAMBLÉN

Both individuals and groups may take on outsider status depending on the extent they deviate from social norms and the extent they act as critics of society. In this paper, the role of art education outsider individuals and groups and the taboo subjects they discuss are examined in relationship to the norms of the policy-making institutions of art education. It is proposed that not only are outsiders necessary for maintaining the health and integrity of the field, but also that outsider status might be considered a desired state of being in that it allows individuals to exercise choices and freedoms that are denied more secure and protected insiders.

The observation that flies, gnats, mosquitoes, and other small flying insects tend to be bothersome to both humans and beasts led some of the ancient Greeks to consider their more persistent philosophers as horseflies¹ of the state. Socrates, in particular, was a major critic of conservative, entrenched, and unexamined ideas in Greek society. He proudly considered himself a horsefly of the state and, as it is well-known, suffered the ultimate fate for his critical stance. Both individuals and groups may take on outsider status depending on the extent they deviate from social norms and the extent they act as critics of society. In this paper, the role of art education outsider individuals and groups and the taboo subjects they discuss will be examined in relationship to the norms of the policy-making institutions of art education.

Through its actions, the art education establishment both creates and, I believe, needs pesky and persistent horseflies that serve as critics of the status quo, proponents of new ideas, and reviewers of institutional actions. At this time in our field, major professional, philanthropic, and academic institutions, with support from the federal government, are consolidating their efforts toward a particular interpretation of what is to be considered correct art education practice (Bersson, 1987; Hamblén, 1988). Generally, these institutions are proposing a discipline-based art education (DBAE) that focuses on the study of artistic exemplars (which have been so-designated by selected experts), the sequencing of art content, curricular implementation district-wide, the evaluation of student outcomes, and curriculum content in the areas of art production, art history, art criticism, and aesthetics. According to Hausman (1987), "In a time of stress and imbalance there is a welcome and reassuring ring to a more 'disciplined' approach to teaching" (p. 57). Hausman has further noted that school budget cutbacks and proposals for a return to basics have resulted in a re-entrench-