

Coordinators' Perspectives on the First Ten Years of the CTAE

Origins

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An organization is frequently founded when like-minded people come together around issues and goals they feel strongly about. That is exactly how The Social Theory Caucus came about. We, as socially progressive, critically minded individuals, found each other so we could form an organizational home and agency of change within the National Art Education Association. Needless to say, no other organization within the art education profession was fulfilling those two functions for us.

My memory of the first coming together of the people who would form the Social Theory Caucus begins in the spring of 1979 at the NAEA Conference in San Francisco. But the remembrance of my friend and colleague, the late Nancy Johnson, goes back further so I'll begin with an extended quote from a paper Nancy delivered at a Social Theory Caucus session in the mid 1980s. The paper is entitled, "The Caucus on Social Theory and Art Education: A personal Perspective." Nancy writes:

My memories of the origins of the Social Theory Caucus begin with a presentation I made at the Philadelphia Convention in 1977. The presentation was a report on my then recently completed dissertation at the University of Oregon. The topic

was the socialization process in art education. One aspect of this process involved the reification of socially-derived concepts of art.

It was perhaps the idea of reification that caught the attention of Bob Berson who was in the audience at my presentation. Afterwards, Bob came up and introduced himself. He was a doctoral student at the University of Maryland. He was interested in Marxist Aesthetics and found some of the points covered in my presentation to be compatible with a Marxist perspective. The compatibility existed because the theory of socialization I utilized drew upon some Marxist concepts...

The significance of Marx for academic inquiry is his recognition of the importance of social and cultural factors in the development of human beings. Concepts like reification and false consciousness contribute to an understanding of how social and cultural factors relate to an individual's competence as a participating member of society.

A major contribution of Marx to intellectual thought is the idea of being able to work back on society rather than taking it as a given. In this sense, Marx is very much in line with the American colonists and the framers of the constitution. Social reform and activism can appear in many ways. One can dump tea in the Boston Harbor, guillotine French royalty, and march to Selma Alabama. I believe the idea of activism, reform, and working back upon society is where Bob and I, and other members of the Caucus, find our common ground.

After Philadelphia, my memory gets a bit fuzzy. Bob and I may have corresponded, however, I can't recall anything in particular. I do remember, however, an invitation to participate in initiating a group to discuss the social aspects of art education at the NAEA Convention in San Francisco.

Unfortunately, Nancy wasn't able to attend the 1979 San Francisco convention but other future members of the Social Theory Caucus did. We all came together around a session given by Peter Purdue on the aesthetic philosophy of the socialist and

Arts and Crafts activist, William Morris. (Marxism, social criticism and activism were once again themes that brought us together.) The session was based on Peter's doctoral dissertation, which he completed at the University of Oregon. Naturally, a number of University of Oregon graduate students were in the audience. (Recall too that Nancy Johnson was a University of Oregon graduate. That University, with Vincent Lanier, June McFee, and critical theorist Chet Bowers as faculty members, certainly played an indirect role in paving the way for the Caucus.)

After Peter's session, it all began. We probably stayed in that room for an hour or more. Excited by William Morris' ideas, Peter's presentation, and each other's company, we eagerly began to discuss putting on socially-oriented sessions at future conferences; even more, we discussed forming an actual organization concerned with art and society issues. From that moment on, our little group—Ellen Kotz, Peter Helzer, and Peter Purdue from the University of Oregon, myself and several other non-Oregonians—spent a lot of time together: at meals, at parties, in sessions, and in animated discussions. We resolved to invite others to join our fast emerging group. Within a year, Nancy Johnson, Ann Sherman, Jack Hobbs, and socially concerned elder statesmen such as Vincent Lanier and Ed Feldman were on board.

Our first session under the official aegis of the Caucus on Social Theory and Art Education took place at the 1980 NAEA Convention in Atlanta with myself as panel organizer and moderator, and Ann Sherman, Jack Hobbs and Ed Feldman as presenters. The session's title was "Towards a Socially Progressive Conception of Art Education." A lot of people attended. That panel presentation, coupled with individual presentations by Nancy, myself, and others, put us on the map. Like a magnet, our fledgling group began to draw interested individuals our way. By 1981 other key members of the present Social Theory Caucus—Elleda Katan, Cathy Brooks (Mullen), John Jagodzinski—had joined and we were fast becoming something of a movement.

By 1981 we had put out our first newsletter, first Social Theory Caucus Bulletin, our first Constitution and By-Laws. We held substantial NAEA Convention programs in Chicago in '81 and New York City in '82. I believe Herb Perr and Amy Brook Snider joined up in New York. In short order, by 1982, we were granted official affiliate status. We were born running because we felt a strong sense of purpose and an urgency to make art education and society a better place.