

Dr. Nancy R. Johnson

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Dr. Nancy R. Johnson served as the Coordinator of the Caucus from 1983 to 1987. In that sense, she is a factual part of the history of the Caucus, and she needs to be mentioned in any discussion of how the Caucus was founded and how it developed. I believe, however, that Nancy's career and her association with the Caucus are more significant than the facts of the matter or even what she accomplished as Coordinator; rather, her career and what she valued are paradigmatic in many ways of why the Caucus was formed and why it continued to include a diverse and dedicated membership. In this paper, I will present information on Nancy Johnson's career, her research, and her relationship to the Caucus, with the belief that these serve to illuminate much larger concerns of our field and are representative of many other careers in art education.

My knowledge of Nancy's career picks up from different time frames. She received her Ph.D. from the University of Oregon when I was there working on my master's degree, but I don't think that I ever even saw her during that time. Later, I read articles she had written, and I saw her name in art education news items and bibliographic listings. I became associated with the Caucus during the time Nancy was Coordinator, and I met her at several conferences. Finally, Nancy came to teach at Louisiana State University and was there for a little over a year. It was during her time at LSU that I gained some perspective on the events of her career.

When I was a doctoral student at the University of Oregon, to me, Nancy Johnson was one of those wonderful people who had finished the doctoral program, and her bound dissertation on the Art Education Department's library shelf attested to that. In my mind, her dissertation, its physical presence and its character, became equivalent to "Nancy Johnson." The title of

her dissertation was *Ethnoaesthetic Socialization* (Johnson 1977). Nancy did an ethnographic study at the University of Oregon Art Museum in which she recorded docents' statements to groups of students who visited the museum. Nancy transcribed these statements and analyzed and categorized them according to the definitions, typifications, assumptions, and values that were being communicated about art.

Her dissertation, in many ways, sets the tone for the rest of her career—in the ethnographic research method she chose, in her social theory interests, and in the reception she often received because of the social and definite stand she took on controversial issues. She was greatly influenced by Chet Bowers who is in Educational Policy at the University of Oregon. Bowers (1974, 1984) has written extensively on the role cultural assumptions play in the communication of taken for granted, recipe knowledge in educational settings, and he discussed ways of problematizing the generative metaphors that shape thoughts and actions. This, of course, does not sit well with the behavioral thrust of most colleges of education or the psychological model that dominated art education prior to the 1980s. Likewise, for her dissertation, Nancy faced resistance. I saw the completed dissertation, and its actual completion communicated to me—in my pre-dissertation naive state—success and a lack of problems. Her work was talked of very highly in the Art Education Department, but when I told her about that years later, she was quite surprised. I learned from Nancy that her dissertation research methodology had been considered highly controversial, the significance of her study had been questioned, and she had to insist that this particular type of study was what she was going to do for her dissertation. Rather than merely adjusting to the situation and taking the expedient route, Nancy, in this case, and subsequent others, was able to see the situation for what it was and that meant trying to maintain an unpopular perspective and questioned professional integrity.

Her dissertation research, I believe, marks the beginning of Nancy's radicalization and, perhaps, initiation into the conservative thrust of art education and the political nature of academia. Nancy and I often talked about how ill-prepared we were for the behind-the-scenes politicking that goes on in art education and in academia in general. We concluded that we were both rather

slow learners in these matters. Shortly after receiving her doctorate, she was involved in the founding of the Caucus. Although she did not attend the 1979 National Art Education Association Annual Conference held in San Francisco, other like-minded graduate students from the University of Oregon were well-represented among the group putting together the Caucus on Social Theory and Art Education, i.e., Ellen Kotz, Peter Helzer, Peter Purdue. It is not serendipitous that these individuals were also students of Chet Bowers and were looking at the field of art education through the lens of critical consciousness and critical theory.

In retrospect, Nancy's role in the formation of the Caucus seems a natural outcome of needing a forum for ideas that were vitally important to her and that did not fit elsewhere. I think that the rest of her career was a play between the administrative, conservative requirements of the day-by-day teaching situations at various universities and an exploration of ideas and practices that would contextualize art experiences and empower students to examine and create their life worlds. Her research and her association with the Caucus allowed her to deal with the latter in a manner that has had some lasting effects.

Nancy was Coordinator of the Caucus from 1983 to 1987. This was a time when the Caucus stabilized as a small, but viable and often vocal part of NAEA. It was also the time when the *Bulletin of the Caucus of Social Theory in Art Education* became a publication with a definable "look" and has led to the current *The Journal on Social Theory and Art Education*. The Caucus' publications—the *Bulletin*, the *Caucus Newsletter*, and a column in the *NAEA News*—were forums in which Nancy believed the assumptions of the field could be examined for a critically conscious and socially responsible art education. The Caucus allowed Nancy an outlet for her ideas when she was employed at universities that were not always receptive to art instruction that goes beyond the usual studio lessons that focus on technique and formal relationships. Most evident in Nancy's writings as Caucus Coordinator was her emphasis on social theory as it might impact on actual classroom practice and her questioning of basic art education assumptions on studio instruction, creativity, and the use of formalism to organize curriculum content. In the *NAEA News* and in the *Caucus Newsletter*, Nancy presented

lesson ideas for social, critical consciousness, and she wrote of the need for collaboration among social-minded researchers.

In addition to Nancy's contribution to the Caucus, her research showed a consistent concern with the social, contextualized nature of art instruction. She did a series of classroom observations in which she recorded and analyzed the statements teachers and students made about art in elementary, junior high, and high school classrooms (Johnson, 1982, 1986a, 1986b, 1986c). There was a thoroughness and consistency in her research that is often not seen in art education. She talked to me about how important it is that we have studies that build upon each other and provide a basis for theory development and classroom practice.

More recently, Nancy had been working on developing the framework for what she called CLAE or cultural literacy art education (Johnson, 1988). Rather than talking about cultural literacy as a body of knowledge particular to a given culture, such as Bloom (1987) and Hirsch (1987) do, Nancy proposed that cultural literacy should be considered an ability to decode the deep structure or assumptions of one's culture, or, in the case of art, the ways in which art designations are made, who makes such designations, and how our aesthetic metaphors shape understandings of art. This, of course, goes back to Chet Bowers' (1974, 1984) work and to her dissertation. She was also developing curricula that incorporated cultural literacy with multicultural art education in Louisiana, and the two of us were talking about doing research on local or everyday art knowledge as it differs from the "school art style" Efland (1976) has identified. Herb Perr's (1988) work on collaborative art was a direction that she felt could incorporate the character of local/everyday art knowledge with the art of different ethnic groups. These are also some directions that I notice continuing or surfacing in my work at this time, and for that I owe a debt to Nancy, among other less tangible debts.

In talking with Nancy, there was such a sense of possibility. Someone said to me, after Nancy died, that I had not really known the radical Nancy. Perhaps, that is true, but, even so, I was awed by her. She was an exceptionally bright person, and

she had found that that could be intimidating, so she often kept much of what she knew and thought out of conversations where she felt her ideas could get misinterpreted. In that sense, she may have, over time, become more careful as to when and how she expressed her ideas. Many of us have worked at universities where topics such as hermeneutics, critical theory—or even collaborative art—are looked at askance or are suspect. I think that very little has been done to improve the work conditions and well-being of art educators in much higher education. I sometimes think that it is quite admirable that we accomplish as much as we do as a field, considering the circumstances under which many of our colleagues—usually women—work. We all know of colleagues and universities where art educators—and beginning art educators in particular—are ill-treated, sometimes to the point of being terrorized. Somehow, knowledge of these situations has merely become part of our informal, oral traditions of the field that provide plenty of grist for conference talk on “who is not doing well” and “who is having problems.” This talk may not perpetuate such situations, but it certainly does not do much to help the people involved. It may, in fact, be a matter of blaming the victim for his or her problems and of distancing one’s self from any responsibility or obligation—or acknowledgement that such situations can become anyone’s professional reality, irrespective of professional qualifications or abilities.

Ironically, Nancy’s last place of employment was at Louisiana State University where she would have been working in the Department of Curriculum and Instruction which is chaired by William Pinar. There was an extremely receptive environment for Nancy’s ideas at LSU; her ideas were both accepted and expected. Nancy said that she did not feel as if she had to conceal or put on-hold entire areas of research interests that she had—and that it was a relief to be appreciated specifically for her ideas on social theory as they relate to art education.

Nancy always found it somewhat strange that art, which is so intimately expressive of social meanings and personal assumptions, can be studied in a formalistic, decontextualized manner. To Nancy, the Caucus was an avenue for making sense of a field—and various university experiences—that had often trivialized art.

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1986-89

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Reflecting upon the Caucus is for me a bit like reflecting upon an event like giving birth. Your work/body is taken over by larger forces. Your biography divides itself into pre and post. You can never again be who you were. And yet what is the Caucus on Social Theory? What's to be learned about it from that short period of "history" during which I worked as Coordinator (1986-89)?

Our name: It was a period in which we spent time discussing our name. That term "social," in our title, how was it understood? Why use a term so ambiguous? Other affiliates were straight forward. For women, the Women's Caucus. For Minorities, Minority Affairs. For ... what, the Social Caucus? For social animals?

Then there was the issue of that "theory" in our name without either "practice" or "praxis" receiving an equal mention. We played out a range of possible changes. They were hopelessly clumsy. Discussion faded. It had only been important to a few of us, it seemed.

A final question was merely skirted: Just which theory or theories were we about? Marxist? Socialist? Critical? Shouldn't we be making clear choices? With any one of those terms in our title, our identity would become much firmer. But the issue was raised only once *a propos* the journal. It was little discussed, quickly dismissed. What should this tell us about who we are?

Our history: And our track record? From year one, we had an annual publication, a few-times-a-year newsletter, a slate of Caucus-identified presentations — plus a membership of 65. During 1986-89? An annual publication, newsletters, a slate of presentations. Oh yes, the journal was more professional; the newsletters, most wonderfully visual. The presentations, however, were the same in number and range; some were ambi-