

Commentary

Nick Webb

These remarks are adapted from part of the session at the 1990 NAEA conference in Kansas City that debated the proposition: "The Caucus on Social Theory is Neither Social nor Theoretical." Webb subtitled his statement: "As the imaginary wine bottles said to the vintner — we're with you in theory but you can't cork us."

I want to argue less about the relative soundness of contemporary social theories (partly because I'm not sure which those are) and more about the reasons why the Caucus emerged. It seems to me that this group could, in 1980, have had a justifiable concern. There was, after all a notable absence of major input into art education language from the, by this time respectable, fields of sociology and anthropology and the almost respectable fields of linguistics, semiotics and a new philosophy responsive to these new -ics and -ologies. It must have appeared that, despite occasional acknowledgement of the new truths in theory, little was being taken seriously enough to trigger changes in educational practice. So the claims of newer disciplines must have been accompanied by a changing political will, for the socially oriented ideas were well equipped to point out the institutional qualities of art education itself, particularly as reflected in the now critically mature NAEA. The parent association was in danger of becoming reactionary, now that it had structures and traditions which would guarantee some degree of self-perpetuation. Conferences were graced by a profusion of past presidents, ex-keynote speakers and honorary life-members. NAEA had legends, heros (the very occasional heroine) and a host of

platform guests most of whom paid their subscription by Visa. But the postmodern conscience was already worried by the Sheratonizing of the American art educational mind and the lack of a cutting edge that would allow us to slit the seams of the cognitive cul-de-sac. Conferences were becoming warm baths, places to see old friends. If you joined NAEA and INSEA you would be able to set up summer house exchanges in perpetuity.

You know, you guys had a point then as now. But I believe that point was more political than it was theoretical. The point about deconstruction, for example, is that it is not good theory. It is, as Margolis puts it, more like a conscience. Most of what there is to Canadian and US politics is not good theory either. There is a sense in which the more theoretical the Caucus becomes, the less effective it is likely to be. My presentation three years ago upon Ralph Smith's *Excellence in Art Education* was, I think, theoretically sounder than Jan Jagodzinski's, but it wasn't as important. I continue to think that Jan's treatment of Ralph was heavy-handed, but it served as a reminder of the relativity of the modernist position, and of the degree to which even the concept of our recognizing stars in our field is itself consistent with modernism. Jan's paper was not fair, but then neither is the Canadian logging industry. Loggers are more likely to be moved by 2x4's than theories.

I guess what worries me is the pretense of theory. I have not joined because I don't know what social theory is. I know roughly what sociology and anthropology are, but the *Bulletin* is not a pure reflection of those disciplines. It seems more likely that the *Bulletin* was designed as the mouthpiece of those who purported to have a social conscience. But then many of us have social consciences. So it appears that the style in which we demonstrate our concerns is somehow relevant. If manifestos were in vogue the *Bulletin* would be printing them. I don't want to be in a Caucus if it means joining something like a Pre-Raphaelite brotherhood or an encounter group. There isn't a philosopher's caucus or a psychologists' caucus. I do have social and political concerns but I do not want my writing in relation to those concerns given short shrift because I do not cite Derrida or because I have not been seen marching for or against abortion.

I don't think I am alone in reacting sometimes unfavourably to the private club feel of the Caucus. It's interesting that as late as November, 1988, the Newsletter notes that having a paper printed in the *Bulletin* requires membership in the Caucus. But I should end with what is for me the final irony. The name of the *Bulletin* has changed — to the *Journal*. The Blue Velvet Underground now has a journal that asks for submissions in, wait for it, . . . the APA format.¹ Come on jan jag, Elleda Kattan, how ya gonna perform down on the APA farm?

You know, the Caucus must have been a Canadian invention. Everyone knows that Canada has spent the last century trying to figure out the who, what and why of the northern identity. Similarly the Caucus has written much throughout the decade on its troubled identity. I don't want to know what the Caucus is in theory. I want to know whether it is, in practice, a group of subversive activists (god knows, we could use a few) or an open forum for the social sciences. If the latter, all I have to do is figure out what social means.

Endnotes

¹ Editor's note: Membership in the Caucus is no longer required in order to be published in *The Journal of Social Theory and Art Education* (JSTAE). While APA guidelines are suggested, alternative formats that are internally consistent are acceptable.

Jon Lang's *Creating Architectural Theory*

New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold, 1987
paperback, 278 pages, \$42.95.

Joanne K. Guilfoil

In a democratic society every designer has the right to speak out on the issues that confront that society. Most of these are social issues but many also have implications for design . . . In these designs social issues have been understood to fall well within the architect's concerns. (p. 234)

This book is written for architects, designers, and students. The goal of the book is to enhance their ability to clearly discuss the built environment in regard to peoples' activities and aesthetic experiences. If we consider architecture well within the purview of visual culture then it should be our goal as well. At issue is the impact of their work on peoples' lives especially when they design environment for people whose behavior patterns and values are different than their own. Consequently designers sometimes misjudge the impact of their work on peoples' lives. Lang questions the quality of their knowledge base for design action and states that it should be enhanced considerably. He argues that the behavioral sciences can help develop positive theory (in explicit description and explanation