**Critical Coalitions in Play**

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The theme of Volume 31 of the Journal for Social Theory in Art Education – *Critical Coalitions in Play* – was developed at the Annual Business Meeting of the Caucus on Social Theory and Art Education, during the 2010 National Art Education Association, held in Baltimore, MD. The theme developed from casual conversations and formal discussions held throughout the conference, a process that has a longstanding history in the Caucus. This process relates to the theme itself, in a meaningful, self-reflexive manner:  individuals discussed the critical nature of building coalitions within the field and between other related fields, and how these coalitions are both *in* play and deal with elements *of* play.

In the process of developing the theme, the membership of the CSTAE was taking part in the very process that we were discussing. This theme was one of many that were suggested. Those who spoke in its favor appreciated the possibilities for incorporating collaborative writings and playful critical interpretative strategies. As the theme developed, and was eventually chosen by JSTAE editors, not all ideas were incorporated. As is common in coalition-building, some voices became the focal point, drawn into the foreground, while others faded into the periphery. Importantly, all were heard. This is an element of the democratic process that is firmly embedded in the

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founding principles of the Caucus on Social Theory, and that finds its way into the essays included in this volume.

Each author responds to the theme in meaningful ways; some present interpretations that align and complement each other, while others coincide and contradict. Such mutability is inherent to the notion of the coalition, a group that is inherently self-defined, fluid, and contentious: "Coalition is universality without conformity, agreement without oneness." (Mansfield, 2010). One unifying element that can be found in each essay is that the authors assume a position of criticality, which is the first, and perhaps the most important, term in the title of volume 31.

**Critical**

While this term is first and foremost, it is not uniformly defined or applied. The term is used in a variety of ways within the field of Art Education; from "Critical Thinking Dispositions " (Lampert, 2006) to "Critical Feminism," (Dalton, 2001), the notion of criticality is interpreted in numerous, often-contradictory fashions, perhaps to the point of near-meaninglessness.[1] Each of the authors in this volume adapts and addresses specific aspects of this term: artistic critiques of material culture and gender; pleasure

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1   A quick search using Google Scholar resulted in 2,180,000 results, referencing phrases such as "Critical Art Pedagogy," "Art Education: A Critical Necessity," "Critical Pedagogy of Visual Culture," and "Socially Critical Art Education." This is not to mention the 894,000 results that relate to the terms "art criticism, art education." See **http://preview.tinyurl.com/3votzzj** for more results.

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and perversion in prekindergarten criticality; critical communication in digital media; critiques of disciplinary boundaries; middle-class values and self-criticality.

Courtney Lee Weida presents a critique of dolls and action figures, in *Gender, Aesthetics, and Sexuality in Play: Uneasy Lessons from Girls' Dolls, Action Figures, and Television Programs.* She presents numerous examples of the repurposing of iconic cultural objects such as Bratz and Barbie, discussing aspects of gender and violence through acts that begin to align criticality and pleasure. In a similar manner, Marissa McClure questions the variety of subversive forms of expression in the pre-K classroom, in *¡Pendejo! Preschoolers' Profane Play: Why Children Make Art.* Where McClure describes the profane and potentially critical ways that young people use digital media as artistic medium, Jay Hanes and Eleanor Weisman address possibilities for critique in and through digital forms of communication, in *LEGO Brick as Pixel: Self, Community, and Digital Communication*. Shifting the focus of critique onto disciplinary divisions, and the authors themselves, Melanie Buffington and William Muth present an analysis of a collaboration between the visual arts and literacy programs in *Visual Arts and Literacy: The Potential of Interdisciplinary Coalitions for Social Justice.* And finally, Lara Lackey and David G. Murphy shares a critical analysis of 'middle-class-ness' in *Parents, Middle-class-ness, and Out-of-School Art Education.* These last two articles specifically incorporate a direct form of self-critique, a quality that is crucial for the development of meaningful coalitions.

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**Coalitions**

As previously described, coalitions are collaborative, voluntary, and often borne of necessity. Recent notable examples of political coalitions can be found in the 2007 defeat of the conservative Coalition Government in Australia, the establishment of a British coalition of Conservatives and Liberal Democrats in Britain in 2010, as well as the so-called "Coalition of the Willing" that pledged support to the United States in the 2003 War in Iraq (Lambert, Kelly, 2010).

While each of these coalitional forms are overtly political, coalitions can be founded upon diverse sets of social, cultural, and personal inclinations and motivations. The majority of the articles included in this volume are, in fact, co-authored pieces; once again we can see the theme being reflected in the process of researching and writing, with authors responding to and critically assessing the possibilities as well as the limitations of collaboration.  The authors describe coalitions that align class and artistic goals in extra-educational settings, that fuse visual art and literacy education with social justice, that blur the digital and the physical, that intertwine higher education and public schooling, and that question relationships between art and material culture.

Lackey and Murphy describes the variable nature of coalitions in educational settings, suggesting that relationships developed between families and non-traditional sites of schooling may negatively affect traditional art educational programs: "To the extent that middle-class parents can activate their resources in obtaining out-of-school

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art experiences as cultural capital for their own children, one wonders how motivated they will be to argue for a strong in-school art education." Where Lackey and Murphy are critical of such coalition-building, Buffington and Muth see positive potential for interdisciplinary connections, presenting suggestions for collaboration between the visual arts and literacy education, and combining higher education and prison outreach. Additional coalitional variations are identified in the volume: Hanes and Weisman describe the collaboration between the professional and the amateur in the ever-shifting spaces of digital communication. McClure points to coalitions between researcher, teacher, and student in the prekindergarten classroom, identifying nuanced moments of subversion, abjection, and pleasure. In a similar manner, Weida looks to potential coalitions that might develop between artists, educators, and students interested in critiquing gender norms within material culture; she describes the pleasure that is often found in the destruction of dolls and action figures, using the meaning-laden phrase "torture play."

**Play**

The last element of the current theme has much to do with the field of art education. Play is central to many theories of artistic expression, ranging from descriptions of expressivity in mid-20th century child-centered production to current research in digital games and physical computing. In this volume, play takes many

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forms: play as catharsis, as subversive boundary-testing, as artistic reprieve from overscheduled upbringings, as counterpart to emotional reunion, and as collaborative design.

As Weida notes, many young people find opportunities to rewrite prescribed gender narratives in illicit, sexualized, and transgressive forms of dollplay. She suggests that these actions might be productively addressed by art educators looking for opportunities to address gender stereotypes and body image issues in the art classroom. McClure also points to moments when the very young deviate from socially prescribed norms through digital performances that are recorded, viewed, and re-viewed, creating a form of cultural capital in the process. Writing about a similar form of creation, but from the perspective of class distinctions, Lackey and Murphy describe how out-of-school art education helps to establish a form of cultural capital that should be appreciated while simultaneously scrutinized for its potentially-exclusionary characteristics. Play as related to artistic production is described in this article as an antidote to an overscheduled middle-class upbringing. For Buffington and Muth, play is not specifically emphasized; however, when described in the meetings between an incarcerated father and his young daughter, it should remind the reader of the necessity of play in emotionally tense and institutionally monitored situations. And finally, play forms the literal building blocks of Hanes and Weisman's article, building historical connections between constructivist play in Froebel and Papert and collaboration and coalition in the digital age.

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While there is no one theory or idea that can adequately unify the disparate ideas represented in this volume, one concept that is referenced both directly and indirectly is that of a hybrid cultural space formed through the process of coalition-building. McClure refers to the third pedagogical site of Brent Wilson (2005), while Buffington and Muth refer to a *thirdspace* developed by Anita Wilson (2001, 2004). In the third pedagogical site, the first site of the self-expressive child and the second site of schooling are potentially fused in and through artistic collaboration. In *thirdspace*, the 'outside' world and the 'inside' prison space are integrated through forms of literacy that are hybridized and unique to those involved in their making.

Both draw from Bhaba's (1994) theorization of a postcolonial 'third space' that negotiates between indigenous culture and colonialist power. It is this negotiation that, perhaps, best relates to the varieties of coalition that are described in this volume. The authors begin to diagram a larger network of interactions that maps, if only temporarily, the spaces in-between art and visual/material culture, disciplinary structures, the digital and the physical, and positions of class, privilege, and power. In this manner, the third spaces formed through development of critical coalitions parallel the sociopolitical potential of the 'multitiude' as described by Hardt and Negri (2004). These are the contingent forms of resistance that are generated within the shifting spaces of globalization and postcolonial power. And, as Bhaba (1994) reminds us, these are the in-between spaces theorized by the authors that have the potential to allow us to re-

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envision critical coalitions in play, within not only art and its education, but within and

between the 'other' and the 'self:'

> … it is the 'inter'-- the cutting edge of translation and negotiation, the *inbetween* [italics in original] space – that carries the burden of the meaning of culture... And by exploring this Third Space, we may elude the politics of polarity and emerge as the other of ourselves (56).

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