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1986-89

## Elleda Katan

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-

tiously choreographed; others, laid open "audible silences." And our membership? It varied between 75 and 90. What should that tell us about who we are?

Outside perspectives: And outsiders — those NAEA-ers who make no move to be part of our activities, how did they view us? A strange question I guess, but I was surprised by how frequently "outsiders" made reference to us. Always it was with a certitude far greater than any the Caucus provided. I'd hear: "socially conscious", "left of center," with the suggestion of new directions, alternative perspectives, critical readiness. It was nice. For a moment, I'd believe that we were more than I knew. Then I'd worry. Weren't we being viewed as more than we could ever become? But I'd listen again, and too often I'd recognize the speaker as one who, through knowing asides, fancied himself the "friend" of progress and youth and risk, all while holding steady to the partyline. So what should that tell us about who we were and are? Nothing? What indeed? That the Caucus is ambivalent, static, a symbol of convenience? A siphon for the energies of authority resistant liberals, tough-as-nails deconstructionists, sentimental new age-ers, and unnameable others? A protected playground for not-so-big fish in need of a little-er pond? A romantic alternative without the discipline or power of coherent direction? Maybe so. Doesn't sound like much, does it? But then again, is that really all that inconsequential? let's look again.

Something: Where there had been nothing, something was and still is and its ten years later. If the Caucus is but an alternative space, that's still an accomplishment. Many a school art room plays the same role. Both are much needed. The ambiguity of just-what-is-art and just-what-is-Caucus only allows for a richer mixture of members and of debate.

A protected playground? But isn't that just what NAEA-ers celebrate as the environment essential to "creative process"? An open ended exploration. A freedom of expression. As for those not-so-big fish, they're the glue that keeps the group going from one year to the next.

An alternative without discipline? Yes, we are certainly that. But collectives that shape themselves towards tightly defined futures, quickly become alternative tyrannies. Their so-called "cutting edge" research becomes a weapon of authority, not insight. In our stronger moments, we do so much more: we reach towards dialogue. We move through ideas to touch psyche; through biography to engage with concept. In place of "new" answers, we create a space in which to pose better questions. Or at least that has happened once or twice for me.

Revolution? And that's the really important step isn't it? Where the questions asked change not just our ideas but the processes by which we pursue them?

An important change in group process occurred for the Caucus when affiliates were accepted into the NAEA. It wasn't easy. Without Bob Berrson's leadership, Ed Feldman's support and the Woman's Caucus' forward action, it would have taken much longer. The major reason we fought for it was to be able to control our own agenda. The obstacles were deadening. An NAEA Executive Director answered our requests that while we might know a lot about education, we could hardly know about "cross-reference scheduling, horizontal programming, non-conflicting time slots, set-up time space, as well as other map-planning requirements." An NAEA Program Coordinator refused us autonomy because, said he, he wanted to contain "burgeoning bureaucracy." However, said he, "in order to not smother good ideas," he would create the title of Coordinator of Special Interest Sessions ... and then add it to his title of Program Coordinator, thus "solving" our problem.

In the language of hegemony, such conflicts are dismissed as "mere" red tape — as problems of a purely mechanical nature. The stances of the Program Coordinator and the Executive Director are tossed off as instances of "administrative style" — problems purely of personality. Hopefully, we know better. These were and are issues of social structure: of central control vs local representation; of instrumental efficiency vs democratic choice. When the affiliates gained autonomy, it was deeply important, not just for their individual agendas, but for our professional association as a whole. And like any such wins by

the less-than-powerful, they have to be continually regained. The notion of an Affiliate's Day was initiated under Feldman's presidency. In the transition to the next NAEA president, the idea got lost. Too much changing leadership among the scattered affiliates; too little history to hold the idea alive in the collective imagination. The concept had to be re-defined, re-rationalized, re-organized anew. And then too, the freedom to generate programs with conceptual depth and collective continuity means little if we fail to exercise it. Always this demands of us an enormous supply of strategy, flexibility and endurance. Maintaining values vivid and formative within a society where bureaucracy is the essential mode for ordering our occupational personae requires nothing less. And it goes to the heart of holding our activities at a National Convention in touch with that larger social purpose. As someone said: "Real revolution is invisible."

1990

## Amy Brook Snider

(Note: this article is the Coordinator's report to the national Art Education Association Executive Board, April 1990, Kansas City)

Because this is our tenth anniversary year or because we are prescient or because we are in a perpetual state of healthy doubt, the Caucus began the task of self-definition at the last conference. Our newsletter, published three times this year, has featured a chain of letters in which eight of our 122 members have reflected upon what the term "social" in Social Theory means. Two of the sessions on this year's (conference) program continue that dialogue.

How could I possibly sum up or characterize the contents of that correspondence? The authors are all active and long standing members of the Caucus representing its great diversity of orientation and style. Does this mean the center has fallen away? I think not, for what endures long after the letters have been set aside are the traces and echoes of individuals with familiar faces, gestures, and ideas — friends in art education. These are not polished articles but private musings for an audience of thoughtful, committed, and passionate people — an audience which is also engaged in the struggle to forge personal and social meaning out of the work of art education. It is a mixed audience of teachers, professors, and administrators seeking to broaden the definition of the profession for it seems as if so much has been left out. They adjust easily to the different narrative styles of our correspondents — a good yarn about a violent taxi cab driver and his passengers in NYC, a lengthy monologue woven of feminist theory and Lacanian notions, a passionate utterance putting politics on center stage. The Caucus accommodates them all.