



Carmen Armstrong, Kristin Congdon, Elizabeth Garber and Georgia Collins receiving the June King McFee Award

My McFee Acceptance Speech  
Geogia Collins  
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It is a great honor for me to be receiving the June King Mcfee Award from the Women's Caucus tonight. This is particularly 50, given my long association with the Caucus and my close identification with feminist concerns in art education. I am a "home-town" girl, as it were.

The description of the award suggest it is to be given to an individual for his or her achievements within the larger professional or public world--a world where what you know is supposed to count for more than who you know, where expertise is more valued than connection. The mechanisms of recognition and acceptance in the public world are often, the obverse of those found in the communal worlds of kith and kin. In the public world, our recognition as valuable individuals is apparently based on assessments of our achievements. In the world of family and friends, however, the reverse is often true: It is because we are known and accepted as individual members of these face-to-face communities, that our contributions and achievements are valued and acknowledged. I feel known and accepted as a member of the Women's Caucus. I find it very moving that this community has chosen to celebrate itself tonight by acknowledging one member's contributions to it and to the larger world of art education.

In reading over the speeches of past recipients, I discerned and quickly identified with the awkwardness many of them seemed to feel (and several commented on) when asked to speak about their personal lives in an otherwise professional context. Perhaps this feeling of awkwardness is not unrelated to the division between what have been called, in our society, the public and the private (or communal) spheres. My research could be characterized as a systematic worrying over such discontinuities of value and meaning as those we experience when moving back and forth between the public world of achievement and the communal world of correction. In particular, I've tried to discover if there were any significant similarities or differences in these two sets of values, and what their interactive effects might be on the status of women in art and the role of art education in the schools. How and why I developed these research interests, how and why I became a feminist and art educator have, I believe, everything to do with my sense of belonging or not belonging to various communities, and the personal problems I have experienced moving back and forth between them and the public world.

I was born in 1934 in a small town in northern Ohio. The first 18 years of my life were colored by the fact that my grandfather and father were physicians in this small

town, bringing me, my mother, and my sisters a distinction and privileges we had neither earned nor indeed handled very well. I sometimes draw illustrated maps of this town, calling on a clear memory of its every house, farm, and backroad. When I return now to visit family and friends, I am always disappointed to find how much the town has changed. Quadrupled in size, subdivisions where farms used to be, it now contains a large high school named "R. B. Chamberlin Senior High" (after my grandfather) and a large park with pool and outdoor theatre named "Glenn Evelyn Chamberlin Recreation Area" (after my father). Although I take a certain family pride in these memorials, I am glad I didn't have to graduate from (cheer for) something called R. B. Chamberlin Senior High School, and I would, even now, rather walk in old Bissell's woods than go swimming in a park called "Glenn Evelyn Chamberlin Recreation Area." My grandfather would have loved the the hoopla and fuss, my father would not have.

To my knowledge nobody in my family had ever been or wanted to be an artist. Nobody in my town was an artist. Art was not even taught in the school when I was there. Nevertheless (perhaps "therefore"), I decided very early that I would become an artist when I grew up. I spent a lot of time drawing images on the front and back fly pages of books my parents or sisters had foolishly left unattended. In the summer before my senior year in high school, I took two art courses at the Cleveland Institute of Art. I could not believe that there were so many other people with similar, private dreams of becoming "real" artists

My young girl friends and I often talked about what we wanted to be when we grew up. Jane wanted to be a secretary, Judy, a teacher, Mary Lou, a nurse, Roberta, a movie star, and I (as I have said) wanted to be an artist. These futuristic discussions always ended with descriptions of the men we would marry and the children we would have. I claimed to want six children all boys, I remember having an exhilarating sense of power whenever I made that claim.

When I was in the fifth grade, my girl friends and I liked to do acrobatics on the metal bars out on the school playground. We found it embarrassing, however, that hanging upside down with our dresses over our heads inevitably precipitated chants of: "I see Germany. I see France. I see somebody's underpants." It seemed to me that if we could wear slacks or jeans, we might then be free to cavort on the bars without embarrassment or ridicule. A small group of us decided to challenge the de facto dress code, and we tried to talk all our female classmates into a promise of wearing slacks or jeans every Thursday. We reasoned that if we stuck together, if we all did it, then no one could stop us. As our conspiracy developed, however, I began to worry about what might happen to the individual who forgot or whose parents would not allow her to wear jeans to school I spent a lot of psychic energy insisting that the group strive for solidarity but not ostracize those individuals unable to conform to our plan. Where I came by such ethical fastidiousness, I don't know—my mother probably—but in any event, my friends indulged me, and we agreed. Long after most of us had given up exploring the transcendent capabilities of our bodies and had focused on turning these into magically attractive objects, the female members of the Class of 1952 wore Jeans to school on Thursdays.

After graduation, I went off to the University of Wisconsin to major in art. Although the majority of my fellow art students there were women, neither they nor I found it particularly remarkable that without exception all our art studio teachers and all the artists we studied in our art history courses were men. What we did discuss, however, was the inadvisability of majoring in art education as a "fall-back" plan—we agreed that any such practical hedging of bets would be a sign that we were not serious about becoming "real" artists.

I had entered Wisconsin with the vague assumption that becoming an artist was somehow a matter of intensely pursuing one's own private dreams. While there, I learned nothing to suggest that one might become an artist within the embrace of a tradition or a community. Becoming an artist was something one had to do on one's own. At the end of my junior year, I saw no reason, therefore, not to get married, quit school, and move to New York City. And that is what I did. I find it significant now that my family did not object, my

teachers did not object, my friends did not object I also find it significant that I am still glad they didn't.

I loved New York. Perhaps I admired its resistance to my hither-to unchallenged, small town sense of self-importance. My husband, having left Wisconsin with me and a degree in philosophy, sold shoes for Thom McAn and worked on his Masters at the New School for Social Research. One summer he worked a night-shift at a bank. By then we had had the first of our three children and were living in a one-room apartment on Gravesend Bay. Everyday that summer I took my son to a different part of Brooklyn by bus, so that my husband could sleep. It never entered my head to get a job so that we might be able to afford a larger apartment. Indeed, had it crossed my mind, I'm sure I would have thought such a move nothing short of a crass admission that things--things such as cars and rooms--were more important than ideas and art. Compared to the pursuit of ideas and art, I thought that housekeeping and child rearing were simply challenges to be managed as efficiently as possible. The smell of turpentine and wet oil paintings in a one-room-apartment-for three soon became out of the question. I took art classes at Brooklyn College and the Brooklyn Museum to have a place to work.

By the time my son was four years old, my Dr. Spock book literally fell apart. Another book, I consulted back then, survives. It is not even dog-eared: the Housewife's Handbook Methods and Techniques of Modern Housekeeping Designed to Save You time, Energy, and Money. While preparing these remarks, I had a fit of nostalgia and pulled this book off the shelf. There on its fly pages were drawings I had made back in New York: images of people--two women, actually--one an armless nude, the other a woman with apron, sensible shoes, and no hands. If this suggests that I felt somehow powerless when I made these drawings, there is always the possibility that I never learned how to draw hands at the University of Wisconsin.

I still, think about New York. I have a daughter who lives in the Bronx and works on Wall Street, and a daughter who lives in SoHo, working on her MFA. She doesn't talk about becoming a real artist; she calls herself a "painter." My once small, Brooklyn-bus companion is now married and teaching something called "Artificial Intelligence" at Northwestern University. He and his wife say they are waiting until she completes her MBA to have their first baby.

In 1961, we moved to Indiana where my husband completed his PhD. While there, I took one course in art history. I listened to Professor Hope (actual name) describe, with great poetic eloquence, the aesthetic merits of numerous paintings by a series of European male artists. Then I wrote a term paper about romanticism and realism in art from a sociological point of view. I got a "C." In amazement, I confronted the professor. He said he had read only the first few pages, felt that social movements had very little to do with understanding and appreciating art, but that he would give the paper a second try. He changed my grade to "A." I don't think he cared one way or another.

In 1966, we moved to Lexington, Kentucky, where my husband began his college teaching. Instead of painting, now that I had the space, I began to read--and read some more. I wanted to know something--I wasn't sure what I wrote a lot of poems--I didn't know why. I was very restless.

In 1969, when the youngest of our three children was four years old, my husband brought home a brochure listing courses that might be taken at a Free University run by students at the University of Kentucky. I decided to attend a Women's Liberation course, which turned out to be not a course, but an organizational meeting. I remember two things from this meeting: that three men were "invited to leave the room before the meeting began and that we were handed a list of questions for open discussion. One question on that list was; Why do so many people say they would rather have boy babies than girl babies?

What I discovered at this and subsequent meetings was that the life decisions I had made (and which I had experienced as a series of intelligent compromises, courageous choices, and idiosyncratic inventions) formed coherent and predictable patterns very much like those found in the lives of other white, middle-class women. I was amazed: How could

so many otherwise unique, free individuals have made so many identical choices? I went to the library and dug up Betty Friedan, Virginia Woolfe, and Simone de Beauvoir. I went back to school. It suddenly seemed very important to have a job in the public world. Making art took on a new priority for me, but I was even more eager to discover how it was that people become artists in our society and how art has been done (learned and taught) in this particular culture. I chose to major in art education—not as a hedge against a naive bet, but as the beginning of another life, the meaning of which only I could take responsibility for.

After getting my undergraduate degree and certification, I taught art in a private elementary school. While working on my Masters Degree, I was asked by the University of Kentucky to teach art education service courses to elementary-education majors. I could not help but notice that nearly all the students in these classes were women. I liked college teaching and I thought I was pretty good at it. I decided to get a PhD.

In pursuit of this credential I went to The Ohio State University, a three and a half hour drive from Lexington. I rented a dorm room of my own there. I could work all night and eat anytime I felt like eating. I took courses from people like Bob Arnold, Terry Barrett, Rogena Degge, Arthur Efland, Nancy MacGreggor, Ken Marantz and Ross Norris (these names are in alphabetical order). Having the conviction that one's peers can be as important as one's teachers in encouraging scholarly endeavor, late in my program Ken Marantz insisted I meet and compare notes with another graduate student who seemed to be as intent as I in pursuing a feminist line of inquiry. That student was in fact my now good friend, Renee Sandell, with whom I have since worked on several writing projects, including our co-authored book, *Women, Art, and Education*.

But back then (at Ohio State) my life was very much that of a commuting, older-adult graduate student. I drove home to Lexington, every Friday night and returned to Columbus every Monday morning. One January weekend, I was stranded in Columbus by a blizzard on my birthday; I cried myself to sleep. At home weekends, I tried to cook enough food for the week—more to ease my non-feminist feelings of guilt than to feed my family. My husband and children learned how to cook some things. They ate a lot of short-order food.

In 1978, I completed my degree. The title of my dissertation was: "The Sex-Appropriateness of Art Activity for the Female." During its defense I had a sudden, quite startling impression that I might know more about my topic than anybody else in the room. Later came the more sobering realization that, if that were true, it might be because I had learned more about this subject than anyone else would want to know. If my highly focused research interest promised to provide me with a strong sense of continuity between my own personal and professional lives, such intense specialization brought with it a peculiar sense of isolation. I took this sense of isolation to be the probable price of achievement in the public world.

Before I graduated from Ohio State, I took an "issues" course from Bob Arnold. In this course, I wrote a paper on the values of immanence and transcendence: "Toward an Androgynous Model for Art Education." Bob Arnold encouraged me to come to an NAEA meeting to read this paper. Besides Arnold and myself, only two other people showed up for my presentation. They were Enid Zimmerman and Gil Clark. I thought: I can't be expected to stand up here and read a scholarly paper to three people (one of whom has already read it). I was wrong: Enid expected nothing less. She insisted that I go ahead, that I was among friends, and why not think of it as practice. Later I submitted this paper to *Studies in Art Education*, and it was published in an issue devoted to women's concerns. I joined the Women's Caucus. My peculiar sense of irrelevant expertise and isolation soon decreased.

I teach art education at the University of Kentucky. It has been 13 years since I received the credential allowing me to do so. In those 13 years, I believe I have been able to make a valuable contribution to art education through my teaching, my theoretical inquiries into feminist issues in art education, and my recent, soon to be concluded,

editorship of Studies in Art Education. I am proud of my professional achievements but I know that without face-to-face community, without the generous support and honest challenge of colleagues and students, without friends--here and not here this evening--these achievements would not have been possible (and if possible, would now be drained of much of their personal value and meaning.)

In seven years I will retire. By public-world standards, mine will have been a relatively short career. As an individual with only one life to live, I have struggled to be at ease with the choices I have made in an ongoing, not always successful effort to accommodate my (and others') needs for both connection and achievement.

I continue to question a society which tells its daughters (my daughters) that their desires for public achievement are unfeminine and that, for them, such desires can only be fulfilled with the sacrifice of connection. I question a society which tells its sons (--my son) that to tend the communal hearth, that to selflessly nurture or delight in the growth of others are unmanly concerns. I am also painfully aware that for many men and women in our society (in our world), the human needs for connection and achievement have been brutally crushed or denied.

To the degree I have been able to stay centered in the face of my own occasions of good or bad fortune, it is because I believed my mother when she said that it is vain to take excessive pride or blame for the circumstances in which we find ourselves; that we can only hope to hold ourselves accountable for how we respond to them-- and for how these responses might affect ourselves and others.

I became a feminist one day in 1969. I am still working on becoming an art educator, a person who can live with herself and others, and (of course) a "real" artist.

Thank you for acknowledging my efforts.



Georgia Collins and Rennee Sandell in Atlanta , Georgia  
at the June King McFee Award Ceremony, March, 1991

