

June King McFee Award Acceptance Speech, March 23, 2002
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Several years ago, at a National Art Education Association conference, I did a slide presentation called "Outside Art" (1996). It was a meditation on my photographs and research about snowmen. I'm not sure if it comes with the territory of our profession, but I felt at the time that my subject and approach seemed different from many of the presentations at the Conference--a feeling I often have in my professional activities on national and local fronts--and even on my home ground at Pratt Institute.

My professional values were shaped in college and graduate school as a student of painting rather than teaching. When I began teaching art in the New York City public schools, my family and friends were visual artists rather than teachers. I thought of myself then as a painter who teaches. Now I think of myself as an artist of teaching who doesn't paint. This early history may explain, in part, the origins of my position vis-a-vis art education, that is, why my teaching and research are not in the traditional scholarly mode.

My **other** "way of telling," to paraphrase John Berger (1982), reflects a particular brand of pedagogy and aesthetic sensibility. In this talk, I will attempt to characterize how I work through a discussion of three of my professional values--**an emphasis on form as it shapes content, a feminist approach to art education, and the somewhat idiosyncratic nature of my research interests.**

First, the idea of form or format has preoccupied me for many years. In the Art and Design Education course I teach, I exhort my students to escape from what I call the "prison of 9 x 12" which confines and limits our work in the art room whether it be the paper for drawings, paintings, photographs, computer images, and collages or the shape of our tables, rooms, and schools. I tell them to think about other formats for imaginative projects, showing examples from a variety of sources like children's picture books, installation art, and performance.

My exploration of what Ben Shahn has called the "shape of content" (1957) began when I was an elementary school "cluster" art teacher moving from room to room in 45 to 50 minute periods. I had to learn while teaching since I was "an untaught teacher" to use the poet Denise Levertov's description of herself (1973). In the "Room as a Loom," I asked a sixth grade class to use the room and its furniture as an armature for collaborative and individual weavings. Another example of my early attempts to break out of the traditional school art format was the construction of a cave-like entrance to another sixth grade classroom made out of chicken wire and paper mache. Theodora Skipitares, a performance artist, emerged from the mouth of the cave dressed like a shaman in an outfit assembled from hundreds of marrow bones. The students were painting bison and making hand prints while I was reading a passage from James Fraser's The

Golden Bough (1958), about a prehistoric ritual conducted by a shaman dressed in bear skins.

In 1974, a New York Times article (Taylor) about a Nigerian artist-teacher, Esie Sagay, living in New York, led to my first teaching epiphany.

After showing my fifth and sixth grade art classes the intricate hair sculptures which took Ms. Sagay seven or eight hours to complete, along with several reproductions in African Textiles and Decorative Arts (Sieber, 1972), I asked them to create hair sculptures using the corn-rowing method in vogue at the time. Photographs of their hair design and related Body Art projects were the focus of a school exhibition, and Ms. Sagay accepted our invitation to demonstrate the hair-tying technique (a two hour version) she had learned in a Nigerian boarding school on one of our sixth grade students.

It was when I began introducing her to the assembled audience of students, teachers, school notables, and video crew that I experienced my epiphany. Chills and other physical sensations [accompanied]. . . the sudden recognition that I had found my metier. I had brought together a group of people of varied ages and backgrounds and introduced them to the idea of art outside the museum precinct. Equally important, I had given [African-American] . . . students the opportunity to meet an African artist-teacher whose story would give them an increased pride in their own rich cultural heritage.

After indicating the topography and national boundaries of Nigeria on a large map of Africa, Esie showed photographs of her family, friends, and schools, told us personal vignettes about her childhood, and taught us several Yoruba phrases. During her hair-tying demonstration, she punctuated her explanation of the process with information about other African languages, the impact of Christianity on African culture, and finally [the contrast between] . . . living in Nigeria [and] . . . her life in New York City. It was an inspired performance which allowed me to include my talents as an impresario in my newly-expanded role as an art teacher. (Snider, 1989, pp. 49-50)

In the spring of 1979, four years after losing my teaching job to the budget cuts in New York City, I began my life at Pratt supervising student teachers. There, I met with yet another kind of curricular and intellectual confinement, this one defined by academic politics and strict departmental and school boundaries. Without realizing it, I began to look for ways to question those boundaries both within the Institute and in my outside professional activities.

In the summer of 1987, for example, a course I developed with Harold Pearse was offered at both our colleges. It featured two consecutive, three-week

internships; the first one in New York and then, the second, in Halifax, Nova Scotia. Our students took turns being knowledgeable natives and uninformed foreigners. They assisted in a variety of non-traditional educational programs in hospitals, community centers, and museums. When one of the Canadian students, Isla McEachern, was unhappy with the format of the assigned research paper, I suggested that she write me a letter about her experience and I would write an answering letter. Not only did Isla embrace this assignment with enthusiasm but our correspondence became the nucleus of two articles--one in the NSCAD Papers (1988) and the other in The Journal for the Caucus on Social Theory (2000).

I continued playing with form in another article called Towards a Personal Mythology of Teaching (1989). My subject was the relatively high status of the artist in contrast to the status of the teacher in our society. I wrote, "We can help to confer that status on our profession by creating a mythology with the heroes and heroines to populate it" (Snider, p. 48). The format of the article was inspired by Walter Benjamin's method of creating a collage of quotations in his essays. I asked the reader to substitute "teaching" or "teacher" for the words "art" and "artist" in all the quotations. According to Hannah Arendt, Benjamin's "main work consisted in tearing fragments out of their context and arranging them afresh in such a way that they illustrated one another and were able to prove their *raison d'être* in a free-floating state. . . ." (1978, p. 47).

I also explored issues of format and style at the NAEA annual conferences. When I was Coordinator of the Exhibition Committee in 1982 in New York City, I looked for an alternative to the traditional exhibition of children's art which often has no other organizing principle than that the work is all by children. Our Committee designed a series of specific art projects; selected work from slides sent in by art teacher members; and developed a narrated slide presentation which played continuously in the hotel lobby.

After attending a few more NAEA conferences, it was apparent to me that a number of the presenters read their papers with little regard for exciting or inspiring their audience. It was for the 1984 conference here in Miami that I co-designed a session, To Read or Not to Read: Presenting at Professional Conferences, probably one of the first "performance" presentations at an NAEA conference.

It was only a short leap, on my part, to question the overall conference structure. In a sense, the conference could be compared to that conventional children's art exhibit in that many of the sessions were related to each other only by their connection to a broad category of art education, e.g., Elementary. So I decided to create my own inner connections and began to develop mini-conferences on specific themes. There was, for example, a series of related sessions for the Woman's Caucus which I co-directed with Maurice Sevigny called Style in Art Education: A Question of Gender? (1985); and, at the same time as the Rodney

King riots, several NAEA colleagues and I presented the mini-conference, And the Walls Came Tumblin' Down: A Celebration of Diversity.

I also looked at the content of our annual conferences. Under the aegis of The Caucus on Social Theory, I designed the series, The Conference as Ritual: The Sacred Journey of the Art Educator with Harold Pearse and Cynthia Taylor. The noted folklorist, Michael Owen Jones, attended the sessions in the role of non-participant observer and allowed us to "see ourselves as others see us" at the conclusion of the program.

The second aspect of my work that I'd like to discuss is my "hiddenstream feminism" to borrow a term from my friends Georgia and Renee (Collins & Sandell, 1984, pp. 93-110). In other words, I don't consciously think or plan to focus upon or include women's issues in my work but somehow they still inform or inspire what I do. For several years, I was Director of Pratt's Writing Across the Curriculum Program where I developed The Journal Project, a collaboration between faculty and students from every school on campus. Each semester, a different group would keep journals of a class of their choice and meet bimonthly to reflect on the issues in teaching and learning that came up in their writings. The structure of these meetings was modeled upon the format of my women's consciousness raising group in the mid-'70's. We read excerpts from a journal and then we went around to each person in the group at least once before it turned into a free wheeling conversation.

Since the 1970's, collaboration has been a central value in the women's movement. My own interest in working with other people may explain why I am in art education and not making paintings alone in a studio. After hearing a talk I gave at an education meeting of the American Institute of Architects, one of the architects and I began a series of conversations about designing educational spaces. He invited me to join his firm in their application for the design of an Art Center for school children and their families at the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts. We were awarded the project and spent a long weekend at the museum on the design. It was fascinating to see our ideas take on concrete form as one of the team translated them onto a blueprint.

My preoccupation with storytelling, autobiography, and biography might also come under the heading of feminism. "Women, African-American and other marginalized groups have found autobiography to be a transformative genre" (Langness & Frank, 1981, p. 93). My own interest in the trajectories of people's lives began when I was an adolescent reading about famous people--from Martha Washington to Mahatma Gandhi, I read them all. When I became a teacher, the unique stories of writers and poets who taught in the schools at that time "reinforced my own views and lessened my sense of isolation" (Snider, 1995, p. 23).

A panel that I organized for the NAEA conference in 1986 called Lives of the Artist-Teacher: Stories and Myths that Inspire and Instruct was the "first extensive look at individual art educators' life stories or autobiographies as a vehicle for educational insight" according to Harold Pearse (1994, p.115). Personal narrative was the starting point for at least six conference sessions and programs in which I presented papers or that I developed during the next seven years (1995, p. 29).

My dissertation was a case study of three students in a course called Twentieth Century Ideas About Art and Self. About halfway through the semester, the only male in the group dropped out. As I constructed the portraits of the three young women remaining, it was clear that gender had played a major role in their life histories. I found indeed that "each of these students needed to feel more comfortable with [herself] in the world. [One] . . . was searching for a place to feel at home;" another had a problem with male authority figures whom she felt inhibited her from expressing herself; and the third "experienced a sense of isolation" as a result of her feeling that status was the key to finding a place in the world (1995, p. 243). The conflicts that were revealed in these portraits hold a special significance for women in light of Gilligan, Lyons, and Hanmer's (1990) **re-vision** of female psychological development (Snider, pp. 243-244).

And finally, there are my idiosyncratic interests and their somewhat unconventional relationship to art education.

At the end of my snowman paper I ask,

What have I learned through my . . . study of the snowman? A short biographical note might be helpful here. I gave up painting a few years after graduate school and felt for a long time [afterward] that I was missing something. In retrospect, I found that much of my writing and research was concerned with the creative process, artists outside the mainstream, [such as] . . . children, self-taught and outsider artists, the late style of painters like Monet and Goya, and mavericks like Antonio Gaudi. (Snider, 1996, p. 6)

In other words, I was thinking about what it means to be an artist by focusing my attention on those individuals who weren't always considered professional artists or whose work had some tangential relationship to art or to an existing body of work.

I was especially curious about self-taught artists who did not have a formal art education. Don Sunseri, the founder of GRACE, Grass Roots Arts and Cultural Efforts, in the Northeast Kingdom of Vermont introduced me to his rural elderly artists. Before I knew it, I was looking in New York City to find their urban counterparts. The traveling exhibition I co-curated, Images of Experience:

Paintings of Untutored Older Artists, marked the beginning of my research on how experience rather than schooling educates.

A subsequent related project called Shared Visions: Old Masters and Young Artists Collaborate involved two elderly self-taught artists (and an artist-teacher) who were placed in two public schools in Bedford Stuyvesant, Brooklyn. They taught the children using their own work as inspiration. Later, two "living history" plays drawing upon their life stories were written and performed by the children and the artists.

I then became involved with what might be considered the null hypothesis of self-teaching, that is, the study of art on the college and university level. At Pratt, I planned a two-day conference called History, Reminiscence, and Conversation: New Perspectives on Teaching Art which focused on post-secondary studio education. And, in my dissertation, I offered a sustained critique of the subject and suggested that college instructors of art and design would benefit from a background in art education.

My recent projects at Pratt include two collaborations with The Beginning With Children School in Williamsburg, Brooklyn. The first is a three year funded program called The 4th R: Teaching Observational Drawing to Young Children and the second is a Summer Design School for 7 to 13 year olds.

From this sampling over the course of my career thus far, I hope I have made it clear how much I enjoy my work as an art educator even when it is at odds with the prevailing currents. How wonderful to be given an award for doing what one loves to do!

In closing, I give a special thank you to the late Sylvia Milgram, my first great art teacher as well as Kathy Desmond and Cynthia Colbert who nominated me for this award; thanks to Renee Sandell and Kathy Connors, who have supported my work in so many different ways, including general cheer leading; to Georgia Collins, Pearl Greenburg, Enid Zimmerman, Ron MacGregor, Harold Pearse, Tom Cahill, and my students, Nancy Opitz and Lizzy Leblanc, who wrote wonderful letters of support; to the Award Committee for selecting me; and finally to June King McFee and the Women's Caucus who made this award possible.

I dedicate this talk to my dear friend and partner Phil Krug who advised, assisted, cajoled, and counseled me in my professional work with humor, fairness, and good common sense.

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