COMMENTARY

Queers and Art Education in the War Zone

Ed Check

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Queer artist David Wojnarowicz (1991) defined and described war zone scenarios in Close to the Knives: A Memoir of Disintegration. He critiqued mainstream United States (U.S.) culture as diseased, much more concerned with universes of neatly clipped lawns than confronting (much less eradicating) abuse, violence, discriminations, fears, and other socially constructed diseases and inequalities: “WHEN I WAS TOLD THAT I’D CONTRACTED THIS VIRUS [AIDS] IT DIDN’T TAKE ME LONG TO REALIZE THAT I’D CONTRACTED A DISEASED SOCIETY AS WELL” (p. 114). My dissertation, “My Self-Education As A Gay Artist” (Check, 1996), was modeled on Wojnarowicz’s strategies of witnessing, anger, and truth-telling in art. He inspired me to think beyond the closet and acknowledge and incorporate the realities of violence and throw-away queer people in my critiques. He reminds me that many of us exist in war zones all of the time.

Judith Herman’s (1992) research on trauma and its impact on combat soldiers, victims of domestic abuse, and victims of political terror apply to many lesbian, gay, transgender, and hermaphrodite experiences. In my opinion, Herman’s recovery-after-trauma frame better represents the realities of the social relationships I have created with queer folk and the culture than do traditional coming-out paradigms. Herman speaks about safety and empowerment, post-trauma, and recovery as restoring/re-creating connections between the public and private, the individual and community, and between men and women. Herman’s frame is about creating new spaces where we can be ourselves. For many queers, survival, safety, and hopefully, healing are a lifetime project. But this is after the trauma has ended. Many queer folk live their entire lives in the war zones.

Wojnarowicz’s (1991) war zone is analogous to many of my experiences in art education. In the fall of 2001, the Texas Art Education Association (TAEA) president canceled a panel I organized for TAEA’s fall conference titled “Sexual Identities and the Art Classroom” two weeks before the conference. She said she did it to save art education in the state of Texas. The same semester, I was asked by my department chair to supervise student teachers at the high school level only. The local school district fine arts head was uncomfortable with me supervising student teachers in elementary schools. Reasons for this position were unstated, but I believe it is because I am an openly gay person living in a conservative area. In
spring 2002, at my tenure defense, an art education colleague alleged that my gay identity compromised our art education program and outreach in the community. “War zone” appropriately describes many of my experiences living in a violent and homophobic culture. The war zone has yet to be fully addressed as a frame, for looking at queer lives and issues in art education literature.

Linnea Due (1995) interviewed gay teens across the U. S. and found that presently as kids self-identify as queer, they are exposed to incredible amounts of violence at a much earlier age. They can’t pass in ways older generations of queer folk could in the ‘50s, ‘60s, and ‘70s. High rates of STDs, suicide, and violence typify many of these teens’ worlds. And yet, David Ruenzel (1999) describes how a few gay kids are fighting back and suing school officials for failing to protect them from violence and harassment from both teachers and other students. For example, a Lubbock, Texas high school Gay and Proud (GAP) student group recently filed a federal lawsuit for the right to post flyers advertising the group’s meetings. Local radio personalities rationalized the student group’s mission as establishing a school-sanctioned sex club. The local school board and community vowed to fight against the student group for the student group’s own safety. Institutional education is failing queer folk in particular and all kids in general through actions such as these.

Evidence of war zones are everywhere. The U.S. Supreme Court rules a Texas sodomy law is unconstitutional. The U. S. Anglicans elect an openly gay Bishop after much debate and an attempted smear campaign. New York City officially recognizes an LGBTQ high school (Harvey Milk High). President Bush speaks out against gay marriage. Mainstream television and cable offer one-dimensional representations “Queer as Folk,” “Queer Eye For The Straight Guy,” and “Will and Grace” of mostly white middle-class and affluent educated gay men. Given the ubiquity of war zones, I no longer wonder why so much queer writing is about safety and survival (especially outside academe). Pleasure, sex and erotics become erratic addictions in war zones. Sex is often quick and unsafe. Queer adults and queer kids are killing themselves.

Art educator Peter Schellin (1990), writing at the same time as Wojnarowicz, was dismayed with America’s responses to AIDS and shocked that “many art students, are still largely unaware of the history of art, its social functions, its political implications or its psychological impact” (p. 84). Schellin eventually left teaching for social work, volunteering to work with people dying from complications of AIDS. He left behind a harsh critique of the field.

For nearly two years, because of the enormity of the crisis (AIDS) combined with relatively little action on state and federal levels and the mounting grief and loss in my own life, I began to feel that art education is a silly field contributing very little to society in general.
and contributing nothing to end this awful disease. Many artists and activists work outside the frame of public schools so they can talk about what really matters and not be silenced by teachers, parents and administration. Education is still quite resistant to the realities of living queer in the culture (p. 83).

In 1992, I presented a session at the National Art Education Association (NAEA) convention in Phoenix titled “Silent Voices Within the Ranks: A Meeting Space for Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual Art Educators.” Queer art educators spoke about their terrors, harassments, missed promotions, firings, and physical, emotional and intellectual incidents of abuse within university and public school settings. That session somewhat mirrored the contents of Toni McNaron’s (1997) Poisoned Ivy. McNaron examined the responses of 300 lesbian and gay academics who taught 15 years or more. She reveals incredibly high rates of terror, harassment, abuse, homophobia, and outright discriminations experienced by lesbian and gay academics. Many of those academics compromised their teaching, research, and social lives in order to not stick out. They were afraid. I know from first-hand experience that many others still are.

Queer issues in art education remain highly under-theorized. It is significant that, to date, my theoretical points of view as a queer artist educator activist cannot be informed directly by art education. I must look outside my field for viable frames and perspectives, as I work toward developing other ways of representing queer realities (beyond the closet). But I am white, middle-class, educated, and male. Other critiques and experiences including race, social class, ethnicity, and disability are desperately needed. Art education needs to support that work. We also need to be vigilant in exposing the sexism and misogyny of queer theories.

Naturally, people in the field want answers. I offer strategies that address gaps apparent to me. NAEA needs to take a pro-queer stand. This is about supporting the human and civil rights of queer people. Queer issues need to be a part of curricula. Why are not more straight art educators angry or vocal about the homophobia and violence in our schools? Why are these concerns infrequently talked about and acknowledged in teacher education texts, occurring as exceptions (often with irrational disclaimers), when we know that in reality homophobia is still rampant in our schools, minds, and imaginations?

David Wojnarowicz’s (1991) queer vision lies outside the boundaries of schools. Desai (2003) examines heterosexual imagination within multicultural art education and posits that queer issues are not a part of that multicultural vision. How will art education begin to peel back the layers of its queer denial, silence, and complicity? Lampela and Check (2003) created a forum for middle-class white educated artists, teachers, and academics to begin a dialogue. Straight art educators need to write about their fears and homophobic behaviors, and their experiences and privileges (e.g., Desai, 2003). Ethnographies about queer teacher and student lives need to be
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recorded. Case studies linking misogyny and homophobias are long overdue. Rethinking queer lives beyond simply white middle-class mostly male realities is paramount. We need to talk and theorize beyond the white middle-class closet, what I categorize as white middle-class privilege, and the misogyny and racisms implicit within these critiques.

Queer thinking combined with anti-bias ideologies holds possibilities not yet imagined nor explored in our field. But don’t get me wrong. Fears and violence need to be addressed and acknowledged. We have yet to do the foundational work to build upon that queer future. While writing my dissertation, developing a cultural critique utilizing the lives of two queer artists, Keith Haring and David Wojnarowicz, I often told my roommate as I walked down our basement steps to write, that I was going down into the La Brea tar pits. I felt really alone, mired in shame, guilt, and fear. I still deal with that on a daily basis, in my department, in courses with students, and in state and national professional organizations. There are allies, but not nearly as many as we need. The sparse output of queer research in art education represents an almost total lack of vision, direction, and support.

I cannot keep on explaining to people, especially art teachers, why queers should count. A national response is called for. Queer keynote speakers should appear at our conferences. Queer kids and teachers need support. This runs counter to many practitioners in the field who wish for us to stick to archaic aesthetic issues and not dwell on divisive political topics. As one teacher so narrow-mindedly chatted about gay issues and art education in a Getty chat room, awhile back stated: “Let’s put the art back into art education.” We don’t have to choose between color wheels and social issues—both are necessary. Diversity and democratic action are strengths of a field with vision. Art educators should be among those who follow the lead of Wojnarowicz’s (1991) observation that to break silence about an experience can break the chains of the code of silence. Describing the once indescribable can dismantle the power of taboo. To speak about the once unspeakable can make the INVISIBLE familiar if repeated often enough in clear and loud tones. To speak of ourselves—while living in a country that considers us or our thoughts taboo—is to shake the boundaries of the illusion of the ONE-TRIBE NATION. To keep silent is to deny the fact that there are millions of separate tribes in this illusion called AMERICA. To keep silent even when our individual existence contradicts the illusory ONE-TRIBE NATION is to lose our own identities. BOTTOM LINE, IF PEOPLE DON’T SAY WHAT THEY BELIEVE, THOSE IDEAS AND FEELINGS GET LOST. IF THEY ARE LOST OFTEN ENOUGH, THOSE IDEAS AND FEELINGS NEVER RETURN. [his italics and boldface type] (p. 153)
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References