CAUCUS ON SOCIAL THEORY AND ART EDUCATION

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INTRODUCTION: "Toward A Socially Progressive Conception of Art Education"

I would like to welcome all of you to the first formal session of the Caucus on Social Theory and Art Education. It has been my privilege to serve as the coordinator of the Caucus in this, the first year of what should prove to be a very long and fruitful existence.

As a Caucus, we are made up of art educators from the United States, Canada, West Germany, and New Zealand. Our membership is open to all and new participants are always welcome. As individuals, we are of different backgrounds and ideological persuasions, but we do share a common vision and goal: the development in theory and practice of an art education which is socially relevant and progressive.

What do we mean by an art education which is socially relevant and progressive? Our first Caucus activity, the panel presentation entitled, "Toward A Socially Progressive Conception of Art Education," will focus on just that question and will accordingly provide some of the initial answers. As we move through the afternoon, from the panel presentation and ensuing discussion, to Ellen Kotz' paper "Technological Metaphors in the Contemporary Landscape," to Nancy Johnson's presentation, "Contemporary Sociological Theories and the Study of Art Education," I think you will begin to sense that something quite exciting and important is taking place; that a birth process is under way; that what is emerging and taking organizational form is a new current and possibly even a new direction for art education in the eighties. To think such thoughts is certainly to be optimistic, but I do not believe that such optimism is unwarranted. Given a committed Caucus membership and the severe challenges faced by art education in an advanced industrial capitalist society, I think it has

become our urgent responsibility to develop and implement wherever possible, forms of art education which will serve humanistic and socially progressive ends.

I cannot help but think that we, as a Caucus, have come together out of necessity, as a counterforce or, at very least, a complement to these conceptions of art education which are largely asocial and non-critical, which zealously emphasize the discipline or the individual, but largely ignore -- in actual theory and practice -- the anti-aesthetic, anti-humanistic aspects of the world in which we live. These contemporary conceptions of art education -- be they child-centered, discipline-centered, or, as Vincent Lanier pointed out in this morning's General Session, Rockefeller-centered -- share one thing in common: a benign -- or in the case of Rockefeller-centered art education -- a not so benign neglect of the larger social, political, economic, and technocratic forces that determine our visual culture, control the mass media, mold our educational institutions, and shape the very form and content of our individual lives.

Given the range and subtlety of our cultural conditioning, art education must, of necessity, become critical. It must place critical cultural literacy in the heart of its theory and practice. Cultural literacy does indeed open the way to personal and social emancipation. It brings in its enlightening wake the preconditions of emancipation, knowledge and freedom: knowledge and freedom to think, feel, and perceive as human individuals and not as manipulated social products; knowledge and freedom to experience and create forms of visual culture which are liberating rather than enslaving; knowledge and freedom to conceptualize and build toward a more aesthetic, humane, and democratic culture and society; knowledge and freedom to develop an art education which would be an agent of critical understanding and progressive social change.