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Canceling the Queers: Activism in Art Education Conference Planning

Dennis E. Fehr, Ed Check, Future Atkins and Karen Keifer-Boyd

A rural junior high art teacher responds to an urban school administrator's threat that cancelled a "Sexual Identities and the Art Classroom" panel session at a state art education annual conference:

It also breaks my heart to hear of such things happening. Just when you think that you are making a difference and moving attitudes in the right direction of awareness, something like this happens-and you are thrown back into the "dark ages." It is a good reminder to all of us that our jobs of educating people will never be finished -we have a long way to go.

A homophobic administrator, fearful of what would be taught in a session described as: "Individual presentations combined with panel discussion exploring Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender (LGBT) issues in the classroom" mandates that principals in his district "not allow" their art teachers and students to attend the state's art education association conference held in their town for the first time in about twenty years. Additionally, he decides to eliminate previously planned district support that consists of audio-visual equipment and paid teacher leaves.



The administrator does not ask local conference coordinators to clarify the purpose of the session. Instead, he convinces the state art education association executive board of his outrage that such a session would be offered for educators and threatens to ruin the organization's future. As a result, two weeks prior to the conference, the state art education executive board cancels the session. Illness and sleeplessness manifests in several executive board members, as one explains her feelings:

I too am very disappointed in the situation we faced two weeks ago and have very strong feelings about the entire situation. I have had a very personal struggle with the issues faced and have had a great deal of difficulty with the entire issue.

Another conference attendee not from the area responds: "so sorry that this oppressive situation exists."

The "Sexual Identities and the Art Classroom" session involved four presenters: two high school art teachers, one from Houston, one from East Texas and two nationally prominent art educators whose research expertise is LGBT issues. Conference co-coordinators believe that the topic is too important to summarily dismiss and therefore opt to offer the session at a nearby state university independent of the state conference. Co-coordinators know first-hand from lesbian and gay high school students that they need teachers, environments, and curricula to include and respect them. Once conference keynote speakers learn about the homophobic incident, they make sexual orientation more prominent in their presentations than they had originally planned.

Since the conference catalogue no longer includes the cancelled session, we decide to announce the workshop at the opening general session. While we unanimously agree to hold the session, we disagree on how to handle advertising the panel. Threatened with reprisals by local school officials, should we make an announcement using the original text, distribute fliers, or even mention the words "lesbian" or "gay?" We struggle through several e-mails and meetings on how to advertise the panel and appease local school folk. A bland announcement written by Ed is a dissatisfying compromise that in no way represents the homophobic interchanges between the local committee, the state art education association president, and the school administrator. We feel silenced and angry. We utilize Dennis' golden boy aura to announce at the opening general session as part of a five-minute welcome our bland compromise:

Gendered and Other Marginalized Identities and the Art Classroom: This university seminar highlights low student selfesteem, self-hatred, teen suicide, and censorship issues in the art classroom. This paper examines how individual and collective strategies and interventions countered homophobia and censorship in a public venue, in this particular case at a state art education association annual conference. We reveal our personal actions and reactions to hysteria, institutional homophobia, and find solutions. Our individual and collective responses demonstrate how layers of emotional, intellectual and activist energy co-exist and that harmony and quick solutions to such complex social problems involve sustained and dedicated efforts.

Golden Boy s Five Magic Minutes Dennis Fehr

Following a glowing introduction from the state art education association president, he majestically rises. Is it his imagination, or does his aura brighten the cavernous auditorium as he approaches the podium? His audience of art teachers perch on the edges of their seats, their eyes hungry as they await the pearls about to drop from his lips. He is, after all, The Golden Boy-the demigod who can send any message, challenge any tradition, mock any standard, and be loved only the more. His task on this, the first morning of the conference, is to welcome the attendees. He has five minutes.

"Welcome, fellow art educators, to our 2001 conference!" His rich baritone washes across the rapt audience like healing waters. "I'd like to tell a story, starting with this observation: The world is different now."

He pauses, making the mesmerized audience wait for the next pearl. "Art education must change."

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Is that a twitch from the association president seated next to his podium? "When I was a sophomore art major, I realized that the solitude of the studio was not for me. I changed to art education and my status among my peers dropped. My work was the same, but as one of them put it, I had joined the 'cut and paste crowd.' And when I began my ten years of public school teaching, the community I taught in considered my subject a frill. I refused to stand for it. But how to change it?"

"First I looked at art history. This is what I found—its themes are war, peace, life, death, love, sex, hate, violence, politics, and religion." She definitely twitched that time.

"I realized that I had been taught a bleached and lifeless version of a rich, and shocking, and ecstatic, and scary, and thought-provoking subject. I had been taught to study how art looks, not what it means. I determined to teach my students art's meanings." Another twitch. More like a spasm.

"But then, how to teach it in K-12 classrooms? Thus I began what would become a ten-year study of how to teach real art to kids with real needs." Now the past-president, two chairs over, twitches. And didn't the president lower her head several centimeters?

"I taught every grade from kindergarten through 12th—mostly grade 8. Some of my 8th graders were on alcohol and drugs. When we studied Jackson Pollock, we talked about alcohol and drugs to understand the artist and his work, and see what lessons my students could draw about art and life, because the two cannot be separated." The president's chin drops to her chest. The past-president's shoulders sag.

The president seems to physically be losing mass. The pastpresident is ashen, and the secretary-elect, seated in the first row, clenches her handkerchief to her perspiring brow.

Cassatt and Maria Izquierdo."

"Some of my students were already in abusive relationships. We studied the sculptor Camille Claudel, who suffered at the hands of Auguste Rodin, and we talked about how to get out. Some were engaged in criminal activity. When we studied Carravagio, we talked about the self-destructive consequences of violence and crime."

The president falls halfway out of her chair before catching herself. The past-president is visibly trembling. The secretary-elect mouths curses. "Some were considering suicide. Although this did not happen at my school while I was there, one eighth grader shot herself in the parking lot at lunch time. That morning she had told another student that her father threw her out—physically threw her through the screen door and onto the porch—because at breakfast in the middle of a screaming match, she finally told him that her boyfriend was a girl. When my students and I studied Vincent van Gogh, we talked about suicide. And when we studied Michelangelo, we talked about gayness in a way that did not get me fired."

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The president moans as she slides to the floor. The past-president clearly needs first aid. The secretary-elect lies prostrate at the foot of the stage, and the treasurer, two rows back, is gnashing his teeth. The Golden boy must wrap this up and begin CPR.

"Here's the latest chapter of the story: I left K-12 to become a professor. I teach art ed majors how to teach real art in a way that does not turn its face from real life. If you already know how to do these things, I tip my hat. If you want to learn how, I'll be teaching a course in it for three weeks this summer at our satellite campus in Junction. Just email me at dennis.fehr@ttu.edu and I'll get you all set up."

He ducks a tomato thrown by an assistant principal.

"Have a rich and thought-provoking conference. You will see the gentle threads of this new art education woven through the sessions. My wish is that Sunday on that airplane ride, you'll not only be thinking 'I loved this conference,' but also, 'I'm going to change how I teach.'" At that point a blast of gunfire sends him diving to the floor. From behind the podium he shouts, "Have a wonderful conference! We're glad you're here!"

So-no more Golden Boy. Bad Boy maybe. Cleverly hiding behind the president's ego, he avoids the lynch mob until, frustrated, they leave in search of the other conference coordinators.

Now's his chance. He dashes for the exit, but he is headed off by a second mob, this one larger than the first. As he prepares to hide under an abandoned conference catalog, he hears a shy voice: "Excuse me, but I simply must tell you that was the most wonderful message I've heard at a conference in ages. And so very badly needed."

Huh?

Another voice: "I want to take your course this summer. I loved what you said."

And another: "Do you really teach like that? Where do I sign up for your

Junction course?"

"Me too! Bravo!"

"Here's my address. Will you mail me information about Junction? And three

of my friends had to leave to attend a workshop, but they want information

too."

"Uh... of course. I'd love to." He notices now that the glow was not emanating from him, but from the crowd. He may no longer be The Golden Boy, but that's fine. Bad Boy somehow sounds even better.

Living in a War Zone Ed Check

If I say I am homosexual, or "queer," does it make you nervous? I have experienced various reactions to that simple disclosure in the course of life. I often wonder whether my being a queer who asserts his sexual identity publicly makes some people see the word "QUEER" somehow written across my forehead in capital letters. And I wonder whether or not that revelation prevents some from hearing anything else I say, or whether or not it automatically discounts anything else I might say. [Italics and caps Wojnarowicz's] (p. 150)

The hostility that I have experienced as a gay male in West Texas these past five years has been described as living in a war zone by artist David Wojnarowicz. Just being who I am, a gay artist educator, puts me at odds with many people at my university, in local school districts, and within various circles of friends. I am no stranger to self-censorship and internalized homophobia, strategies I use to protect myself and create zones of safety in my life.

In spring of 2001, an East Texas high school art teacher e-mailed me, asking if there were any presentations dealing with lesbian, gay, and bisexual issues and the art classroom at an upcoming state conference. (Our fall conference is the largest state art education conference in the United States.) I replied that none were being offered. After discussing the email request with a colleague, I decided to develop a panel that included the East Texas art teacher. The four persons on the panel would address myriad sexuality issues in relation to art and teaching: homophobia in the art classroom and school settings, lesbian

and gay art teacher's internalized homophobia, strategies supporting lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgendered (LGBT) students, and artists making art supporting LGBT issues and people.

When I found out that the state art education association executive board cancelled the LGBT panel for the fall conference, I was angry and embarrassed. Angry that this was even happening in the first place and embarrassed that I had been caught off guard. My self-esteem plummeted and my internalized homophobia escalated as random thoughts flew through my mind:

The bigots and homophobes had won.

How could I be caught off guard?

Why did I ever consider such a panel might fly in the first place?

I was not attuned to local mores and values.

I was wrong!

Where I live, I observe many professional lesbian and gay acquaintances and friends live in fear for their jobs and reputations. They publicly disconnect from their lesbian and gay lives—one of a few strategies whereby they can live somewhat comfortably within the hostile and rampantly homophobic local environments. As an openly gay academic and student teaching supervisor, I sometimes wonder if I will ever be expelled from local schools because of my public sexual identity.

Homophobia is rampant at my university. As academic advisor for the university's Gay, Lesbian, and Bisexual Student Association (GLBSA), I have witnessed countless testimonies from students of antigay violence and overall fears. Letters to the editor in the campus newspaper frequently condemn homosexuals and homosexuality. Gay and lesbian colleagues keep their sexual identities a secret. I have experienced anti-gay harassment as well.

When I began my tenure-track position in 1996, a colleague sullied my nascent reputation with homophobic allegations to local school district officials. Written in my first year tenure review was a statement that if I intended to teach about homosexuality that neither I, nor any student teachers from our art education program, would not be welcomed in the local school district (J. Stinespring, April 20, 1998, personal communication). I felt sick to my stomach as I read this. Internalized homophobia set in as I initially felt my gay identity was compromising our art education program. In reality it was my colleague's homophobia that was the problem. The next day I demanded this person be taken off my tenure committee.

In the summer of 1998, I gave a presentation about lesbian and gay artists to a local chapter of Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays (PFLAG). The members wanted to learn more about lesbian and gay cultures. After my talk, I remember a mother telling me several times how "proud" she felt that her daughter was lesbian. I could see the doubt and pain in that mother's face—she was working through her own internalized homophobia. She so desperately wanted to love her lesbian daughter. PFLAG is a safe and accepting space in Lubbock that fosters tolerance and change.

In the summer of 2001, we decided to offer four "Wellness sessions" for free (that included my Sexual Identities panel) at the conference. I canvassed potential local donors to raise two thousand dollars to offset speaker travel and fee expenses. An officer in PFLAG virtually raised the two thousand dollars for me. She contacted the minister at Lubbock's Metropolitan Community Church (our local gay church) and they collected three hundred dollars in a special offering. A few other individuals anonymously gave five hundred dollars. Others wrote checks for twenty-five to fifty dollars. She was determined to support our panel and make it a reality.

Through it all, I felt like the gay poster boy—inflicting my gay agenda on a homophobic art association and Lubbock community. (Remember, I am not immune to internalized homophobia myself.) The state association president confessed she cancelled the LGBT panel session because she felt she was "saving art in Lubbock schools." If we offered the panel, "art teachers would be fired and children would not have art. Social issues have nothing to do with teaching art." Replying that had she talked to us before agreeing to the administrator's demands, that much conflict and controversy could have been avoided, made her all the more obstinate that our actions were folly and ill-planned. Exhausted at that point, I walked away.

In the end, no one from the conference attended the panel at Tech. (I even rented a van to transport conference members to the university.) A conversation with a conference attendee confirmed my suspicions that our watered-down announcement piqued little interest. Luckily, one of the panelist's friends, a music education professor at Tech, offered to invite her students to attend the workshop.³ Her students were the bulk of the audience. They politely listened, asked questions and thanked us. One student informed one of the panelists that he had just recently "come out" and that our timing could not have been better for him.

According to the art association president this one panel would have led to the destruction of the art organization. Further, she stated that the goals of the panel were not in line with the goals of the art association (E. Herbert, personal communication, November 26, 2001). Both of these statements are consistent with how administrators and teachers dismiss the incredible incidents of the violence and threats regularly experienced by lesbian and gay teens in our public schools (Ruenzel, 1999).

I record this experience as breaking a silence. I must be vigilant and not internalize other people's fears and discriminations as my issues or my mistakes. That's one of the dangers of this kind of work. I maintain my sanity by documenting my experiences and sharing them with others—like a war correspondent. It literally is a war zone out there.

Breaking 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 loud tones. To speak of ourselveswhile 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. (Bold face and caps Wojnarowicz's) (p. 153).

Refusing Silence Future Akins

I don't know what to say. The cancellation of "D" section from the Wellness session finds me emotionally fluctuating between confusion and embarrassment with occasional peaks of anger or outrage. Sometimes, I just want to scream until someone, anyone will listen. Other times, I am too stunned to even speak. For over thirty years I have called this place home. I have defended its uniqueness to strangers and friends alike while proclaiming its creative atmosphere. When others talked of its little towness, or its limitations, I have spoken of its friendliness and it's endless skies. Now, I am not sure what I think. I do know I feel ashamed. The very narrow mindedness I for so long denounced, has proven to be more pervasive and more reactionary than I could have imagined. Still, I find it hard to believe that the cancellation of one small panel, of one experience institute could cause so much disappointment and discontent. I can only hope that this action by a small group of people was done out of some sort of misguided sense of protectiveness.

As for the organization that sponsored this event, I feel betrayed. When I chose to come into education I did so with the idea of passing on a few of the lessons I had been lucky enough to receive while on this path as an artist. Art is and has always been a "safe place" for me, protecting me from a home life I couldn't understand and a school system that didn't seem to notice. I wanted to make a difference by hopefully re-creating a similar classroom that would act as a safe place for young artists to express themselves as they explore the world around themselves. I was excited when the opportunity came to take a leadership role in the planning of this statewide conference. I really thought it was a perfect way to unite my love of art and my love of this region all at one time. I was not aware of nor prepared for the prejudices.

I want to believe that this act of elimination was done by people who have forgotten what it is like in the classroom. People who have forgotten the horrible name-calling and cruel jokes aimed at another's sexuality. That they have forgotten the fear on the faces of the young men and women who have just begun to know themselves when they suddenly are told that they are different and unwanted. They must have blotted out the images of the not so innocent shoving and pushing by the so-called cool kids towards those that are labeled "different". And, I can only hope that they no longer remember what it was like to

hear the silence of some teachers when the subject of home life and family dominate the conversation at the lunch table.

What is hard to believe is that those who made this decision chose to ignore the statistics on suicide which involve issues of sexuality among secondary students. How could they? With one cowardly and overly reactionary demand they limited the knowledge and information so needed in today's classroom. Somehow, the connection between feeling safe and feeling safe enough to be creative and/or productive was forgotten.

I do believe that what we (the local planning committee) tried to do was worth all the time and all the energy it required. Every long meeting every summer afternoon spent in an office instead of in a studio, and every arrangement that had to be re-arranged, was justified. Those teachers that attended the alternative "blacklisted" session, or heard one of the speakers as they made a reference to the cancellation or some other social topic expressed their gratitude for the opportunity for an open dialogue.

Yet, I am not sure if it was worth the pain I experienced the night I found myself across the table from one of my best friends arguing about the word "homosexuality". I can still hear myself sounding like someone I didn't know and don't want to know; defending a system I had ceased to respect. I knew I was simply trying to protect the teachers who, without warning or explanation, had suddenly been told by their principals that they would have to take personal leave time to attend the conference. In a few cases they were even encouraged not to attend. So I argued, knowing if we simply left out the word "homosexuality," we could still get the approval of the district thus allowing the teachers the necessary professional leave time they deserved. Yet, I knew as we sat there trying to find a way to continue that I was somehow adding to the silencing he had endured his whole life.

I believe that I will no longer be able to be this involved with this organization ever again because I am tired and frustrated from feeling ignored. Never once were we—the local planning committee—asked our opinions or the reasons for our decisions. The cancellation was made without a single question or inquiry. I am also tired of trying to explain why human rights are important to us all when I am repeatedly asked why did it matter to me, a "straight" person, if there was a panel on gay issues or not. I am definitely tired of being screamed at by the state president of the organization to be and told I was just a marginal employee within the public school system and easily replaced. Most importantly, as these events fade into some sort of conference myth/history, I know I will never again allow myself to be even a little part of the reasoning for silence.

Art Educator Activism Karen Keifer-Boyd

Our focus in this article is on our responsibilities as teachers and leaders to be cultural workers—working to change schools, curricula, and pedagogies; and on how activism and teaching are slippery slopes, what it means to do what we believe—the practical costs, community costs, and personal costs. The "Sexual Identities and the Art Class" session concerns art teaching strategies to enable self-representation and presentation of identity in one's art and on ways to build self-esteem in the students who have the highest rate of teen-age suicide. Fear, hatred, and prejudice toward those who were not born heterosexual solidified our resolution of the vital need for sexual identities workshops for teachers and their supervisors. Such students know they must live a lie about their identity in school districts that normalize heterosexuality. Teaching respect for all people regardless of race, religion, country of origin, or sexual orientation through

inclusive pedagogies, supported by policy set by district-wide administrators, undermines environments that perpetuate a normalcy that does not fit all students' identities. At this particular school district silence of one's sexual orientation is mandated. This perpetuates a lonely world for the ten percent of the student body born homosexual.

This loneliness manifests itself in social withdrawal, a common psycho-social pattern found in schools that do not practice inclusive policies. There are several ways to circumvent homophobia (i.e., prejudice or hatred toward homosexuals) in your school district, school, classroom, teachers, students, and self. First and foremost, educate yourself and others about sexual identities and the classroom.⁵ Ask your state art organization to include sexual identities sessions in their conferences as annual threads. Ask your district to offer in-services annually on the topic of inclusive teaching practices that include LGBT identities.

Ground Zero: What Does Sexual Identity Have to Do with Art Curricula?

Yesterday I visited a massive gravesite in New York City that the media refers to as "ground zero." This term also describes the place that gay, lesbian, bi-sexual, and transgendered youths experience in schools:

We recognize that schools are "ground zero" in our efforts to curb homophobia. GLBT youth face unspeakable harassment and abuse in schools. What's more, young people are learning in schools that it's acceptable to hate GLBT people. The average high school student hears 25 antigay slurs daily; 97 percent of high school students regularly hear homophobic remarks. This harassment takes its toll: Gay students are far more likely to skip classes, drop out of

school and/or commit suicide. (PFLAG, November 19, 2001. Retrieved from: http://www.pflag.org/education/schools.html)

Few art teachers in the United States disagree that art communicates ideas and feelings. National Art Standards,6 which shape state and local standards, support self-knowledge, self-representation, and self-identity with statements such as: "arts education places a high value on personal insight" (Visual Arts Task Force, 2001). Art is what makes us human. It is what we do with text, sounds, movements, lighting, placement, symbols, colors, and/or voices to stimulate our senses and to evoke responses from viewers about our ideas, feelings, beliefs, and experiences. Art can be persuasive, expressive, ritual, playful, decorative, a livelihood or career, a business, therapeutic, or transformative. While not all art is transformative, both the making and viewing of art can be personally and socially transformative. Transformative power refers to knowledge that empowers self and others rather than dominates. Consider how your art curriculum defines art and how your pedagogy delimits the nature of art creation and study in your classroom. We can teach animals to use art-making tools, but to do so in a meaningful way (some call it the creative impulse or self-awareness) is unique to human's who make transformative art. An art curriculum that includes exploring one's identity and one's heritage matches the National Standards of Visual Art.

Most art teachers raised in a democratic society value the constitutional protection of free speech and include in their curricula ways to develop expression of student's critical and creative thinking. How should the art teacher respond to the child in second grade who shows his drawing of his family that consists of two Lesbian mothers when such expression communicates something that is against the

school district's policy to express? What message is sent to the sixth grader who feels attracted to the same gender and knows this expressed attraction in her art is against school policy and differs from what the teacher defines as normal? Will you provide an art curriculum that encourages students to explore and express hetero-, homo-, bi-, or transsexual identity with one identity not privileged over another, or will some of your students be silenced about who they are? Will your teaching practices help to prevent violence toward homo-, bi-, and transsexual students and self-hatred which too often leads to self-abuse through drugs or suicide? Your art class need not be ground zero.

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notes

1 The authors are the co-coordinators. We call ourselves, the Gang of Four—alluding to cultural revolution, a belief that a good society will rise from the past if that past gets past its oppressive lack of tolerance, Dennis maintained the persona of the Widow Mao in planning the conference, the rest of the gang is still seeking conference identity.

2 The state president consistently projected dooms-day scenarios throughout the planning of the conference. She feared the remote location of the conference would translate into low attendance figures, thus bankrupting the association. When approximately 652 had registered as of Saturday of the conference, she claimed her homophobia had saved the conference.

3 Ellen Herbert, a high school art teacher from East Texas, spoke about the need for positive role models for LGBT students in the art classroom. Houston high school art teacher Michael DeVoll talked about stages lesbian and gay kids go through as part of their "coming out." Ed Check talked about and showed slides of recent art and a current series of posters he is producing on themes of gay identity and schools.

4 According to research by the Washington DC based organization, Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays, ten percent of the world's population, not bordered by race, religion, or social-class is homosexual (2001, Online: http://www.pflag.org)

5 Some suggested readings are: Martindale, K. (1998). Un/popular culture: Lesbian writing after the sex wars. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press; Talburt, S. (2000). Subject to identity: Knowledge, sexuality, and academic practices in higher education. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press; and Yon, D. A. (2000). Elusive culture: Schooling, race, and identity in global times. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press

6 see full text version online at http://artsedge.kennedy-center.org/professional_resources/standards/natstandards/index.html

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