

Performance Art as a Site for Learning: Queer Theory and Performance Studies in the Art Classroom

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A funk rock opera with recovering drug addicts and strippers is staged in the lobby of the National Theatres, Gabriel and Monstah Black / The Roof is on Fire, Suzanne Lacy / Preaching to the Perverted, Holly Hughes / Running Fence, Christo & Jeanne-Claude / A naked a gay man theatrically performs his coming-out story while occasionally sitting on the laps of audience members, Tim Miller / Make a Salad, Alison Knowles / Time Piece (One Year Performance 1980-1981), Tehching Hsieh / Underneath the Arches, Gilbert and George / Cut Piece, Yoko Ono / In his bedroom a man will perform an activity every morning for one month; he will step over an 18-inch stool at the rate of 30 steps per minute, Vito Acconci / 4' 33", John Cage / Doris Day and the Dust Bowl, Joe Goode Performance Company / Paradox of Praxis I: Sometimes doing nothing leads to something, Francis Alys / A black man sells snow balls on a Manhattan street corner, David Hammons / In Los Angeles a man organizes people to build twenty rectangular enclosures of ice, Allan Kaprow / A white woman and Taiwanese man tie themselves together for one year, Linda Montana and Tehching Hsieh / A gay man gives lectures on the politics of dying with AIDS, "Do Not Doubt the Dangerousness of the 12-Inch-Tall Politician," David Wojnarowicz / Jeremy is a Girl, Gabriel & Friends / Activist group stages homosexual kiss-ins in the turn stalls of the

New York City subways, at rush hour, ACT-UP / Silence=Equals Death, Gran Fury and Keith Haring / The Homeless Vehicle Project, Krzysztof Wodiczko / A woman is hired as the resident artist for the New York Sanitation Department, Mierle Laderman Ukeles / A collective of homeless people perform in vacant lots, artist' lofts, and small theaters across the US, Los Angeles Poverty Department – The LAPD Inspects America / A performance art group performs the physical memories of one man's grandfather working on an assembly line, Goat Island / An illegal alien performs naked while painted entirely in green with an American flag draped over his shoulder, Guillermo Gomez-Pena, Roberto Sifuentes, Juan Ybarra / Clit Notes, Holly Hughes / The Chicken Show, Linda Montana / My Calling (Card) No. 2, Adrian Piper / Swimming to Cambodia, Spalding Gray / An older black man crawls from Wall Street to Harlem, William Pope L. / United States Parts 1 and 2, Laurie Anderson / One night a woman has 100 boulders deposited throughout downtown Chicago. On each boulder is a commemorative plaque honoring noteworthy females from the city, Suzanne Lacy and A Coalition of Chicago Women / A block party is organized for an outdoor exhibition of video art created by Latino street gangs, Street-Level Youth Media / Aztechnology, Guillermo Gomez-Pena and Roberto Sifuentes / Hedwig and the Angry Inch, John Cameron Mitchell and Stephen Trask / Funk Lessons: A collaborative experiment in cross-cultural transfusion, Adrian Piper / A black man is taped to a school chair and sits across from an empty chair in a lobby at Penn State University, Conversation Projects, Gabriel and Jake Hoffman

Today, performance art is one of the most useful mediums for helping individuals see themselves differently. In this of "Out of sight" article, I explore the experience of participating in a student's performance art project. This work was a performance of crossing the road. Here, I discuss the inclusion of overtly queer articulations of personal experience within the art classroom. How can performance

art construct learning experiences that engage a dynamic process of self-critique? How are classrooms organized differently when students become actively involved in the development of the art curriculum? And, how might a performative investigation of the sociality of education be undertaken at sites of art education?

* * *

What is learning? Carl Rogers believed it had nothing to do with teaching. Often he confessed to recognizing a separation between learning and his teaching:

When I try to teach, as I do sometimes, I am appalled by the results, which seem a little more than consequential, because sometimes the teaching seems to succeed. When this happens I find that the results are damaging. It seems to cause the individual to distrust his [or her] own experience, and to stifle significant learning. Hence I have come to feel that the outcomes of teaching are either unimportant or hurtful (1977, p. 276)

Learning is not the automatic result of teaching. Among art teachers there is a popular misconception that classrooms are sites where individuals “learn” merely as a result of art teaching. Sites for learning art are much more and at the same time much less than all that. Primarily, learning is a matter of risk taking. It is a process of coping with the uncertainty of perception and feelings of estrangement. The art teacher does not and cannot “command” learning. The learner sees what he or she chooses to learn. Learning is a process of learners making sense of their own perceptions.

In fact, John Dewey was convinced that all learning requires some type of “active involvement” on the part of the learner. He thought the most memorable and useful knowledge is constructed during an individual’s “active involvement with materials and events in their environment” (Grant & Sleeter, 1988, p. 182). Learning might be understood not by searching for the outcomes of teaching, but rather by examining the actions, interactions, and relations between the learner and their teacher/text. The learner generates the dialogues for their learning, raises questions, creates perceptions, and communicates new understandings from their learning.

Curriculum research in art education must help teachers reconsider the classroom as a site where the uncertain process of perception can become a central component in understanding learning. However, this requires a re-examination of the activities that are typically cited as evidence of learning in the art classroom.

Art Teachers and the Challenge of Rethinking Learning

Learning is simply taken for grant by too many art teachers. The curriculum researcher that poses questions about the relation between teaching and learning will find a certain antagonism from many educators. No matter how desperate or disappointing their circumstances become, many art teachers hold tight to traditional concepts of art and education. In an extensive survey (1997) of elementary schools, Christine Thompson observed that the job of the art teacher has changed “remarkably little from the first teaching position I assumed twenty years ago.” (p. 16) Teachers exchange lesson plans that read like recipes for the successful preparation of “ready-made” works of art. Even though critiquing the performance of the art teacher is not the focus of this paper, it is still important to consider the possibly negative correlations between art teaching and learning.

Throughout her survey Thompson includes observations from all sorts of educators who are teaching art. At one point, Thompson quotes a student-teacher who is explaining why she was disappointed in her supervisor's approach to teaching art, "My teacher was very good—great in fact—in every respect. But art always had to be so structured—ladybugs had to have two black eyes and they had to be placed just so. I ended up spending the whole semester cutting *things* out of construction paper." (p. 16) The student-teacher goes on to explain that she believes this is the typical elementary educator's approach to teaching art. In schools too often art is perceived to be "...a series of make-and-take activities devoid of any meaning in relation to students' lives or the learning that is taking place" (Gaudelius & Speirs, 2002, p. 4). As such art becomes an idle time-filler with no significant relations to other curricular goals or the personal experiences of the learners. Unfortunately in many classrooms, art is not used to get learners actively involved in the material or events of their environment.

Does teaching art require an affinity for construction paper? What if like myself, an educator can't cut a straight line? Uncritical notions about learning have led to repetitive and predictable routines in the art classroom. It is these predictable routines that have made the act of teaching often unimportant or even hurtful. The introduction of performance and other contemporary art practices that are related to postmodernism can change the engagements in the classroom in such a way that learners enthusiastically regain command of their learning. Postmodernism complicates boundaries in art education so that teachers as well as students are urged to explore "the interconnectedness of issues of both content and subjectivity" (Eisenhauer, 2006, p. 156). At sites of performance, students are compelled to look inside their curriculum, to look inside the relationships they form, to look inside their own lives, and to look inside what they know in order to become familiar with an estranged sense of themselves and their world.

Performance art allows for queering in the classroom. Strictly speaking, performance art is about individuals addressing and receiving messages. In the space of performance, new meanings for the relations of subjects can erupt. In sight of performance, the relationship between teaching and learning can be criticized and reconstructed. When combined with broad curricular goals, performance can become a site for queering our understanding of the art classroom.

Queering, A Performative Critique of Inclusion

Queering is a performative way of creating social critique that compels a viewer or audience member to psychologically see the self within the issue being explored. Queering uses direct address to layer viewers' experiences so that they feel that they are in a concrete, immediate, and personal relationship with the work in the indexical present.¹ The indexical present is the conceptual space between the artist/artwork and the audience that is only recognizable within the immediate here and now.

In this paper, queering is a "verb." Here, queering is being used to highlight the explicit social functions of pedagogy. Some curriculum researchers including Susanne Luhmann, William Pinar and Deborah Britzman have employed queer theory to insist that educators must rethink what *happens* in the classroom. What many have called "queer pedagogy" is a refusal to think straight at sites of teaching. It provokes uncontainable identities that willfully challenge education's expectations for normalization. Combining queer theory and pedagogy re-characterizes knowledge not as a destination but rather as an interminable performance in the classroom. "Queer theory conveys a double emphasis—on the conceptual and speculative work involved in discourse production, and on the necessary critical work of deconstructing our own discourses and their constructed silences" (de Laetis, 1991, p.iv). Queer pedagogy undermines idyllic images of normality. Deborah Britzman (1998) believes,

In queer pedagogy “the inessentially common” is made from the possibility that reading the world is always already risking the self, in excess of “cases of exorbitant normality”, and with an interest in confounding instituted law. (p. 95)

This is a pedagogical shift from a concerned with identity to dialogue, from an obsession with the objects of learning to an emphasis on the performance of understanding. In classrooms employing queer theory there is a critique not only of learning but also of the identity and the mis-recognition of the learner. The attention of queer pedagogy is on the intimate responses to the relationship between the teacher/text and learner. Once again in this paper queer is being exercised as a verb: to queer, or perhaps queering this of that. Speaking in this way, queering seems to provoke action, specifically a process of identification from within.

Queering occurs in spaces between—between individuals and their curriculums, artworks, classmates, and communities. In her interpretation of *Angels in America* (1993, 1994), an award winning play by Tony Kushner, Alisa Solomon (1997) employs the use of “queer” as a verb. She speaks of how the characters of the play directly address the audience. In the passage below, Solomon refers to the Rabbi, the Bolshevik, and a guy named Prior; these are key characters from *Angels in America* that Solomon believes queer the audience. The Rabbi and the Bolshevik are addressing the fictional audience constructed within the play as well the live audience at the theatre. On the other hand, Prior queerly addresses just us, the play’s viewers. Solomon writes,

If the Rabbi and the Bolshevik constructed the audience as Jewish and communist, in his direct address Prior queers us. ‘You are fabulous creatures’ (Kushner cited in Solomon, 1997, p. 133) is not a sop to a crowd that needs to be congratulated for sitting

through a seven-hour epic drama (though it can, alas, be played that way). Rather, Prior's closing lines, as reproving and hortatory as the Rabbi's and the Bolshevik's, include us in order to challenge us. 'Queers will be citizens,' he declares, 'Without giving up their queerness, just as Jews in France demanded citizenship without assimilation' (1997, p. 133).

The employment of a queered address is aimed at the inclusion of difference within the interaction between individuals. When Solomon writes, "Prior queers us," she is not saying that Prior addresses us as though we were queer, or that Prior makes us queer. If so the term queer would mean that Prior is separating himself from us, the audience. His performance is about inclusion. Solomon explains later in the paragraph, "Prior's closing lines...**include us** in order to challenge us." (p. 133)

Here it might be helpful to say a little about the social context in and around the play. Among other things, *Angels in America* is about the officials in the Reagan administration who had intimate knowledge of homosexuality, but publicly refused to recognize its existence, and tried to ignore the social problems caused by the AIDS epidemic. The play dramatizes the experiences of gay men who were dying from AIDS during Ronald Reagan's term in office. Much of *Angels in America* involves Roy Cohen, the real life council to the President who identified himself as a "heterosexual...who fucks around with guys" (Kushner cited in Solomon, 1997, p.121).

As the subtitle of the play indicates, *Angels in America* is a "Gay Fantasia²." Kushner re-arranges and re-tells what we understand about the 1980s, AIDS, homosexuals, Mormons, Jews, Christianity, WASP heritage, women, homosexual sex, drug abuse, misogyny, sexism, drag queens, Ethel Rosenberg, communism, motherhood, marriage, racism, Rabbis, Bolsheviks, angels, and stories of life-after death. However,

Kushner does not *just* re-arrange what the audience sees, he does not *just* tell a good story. Kushner weaves wonderfully seductive scenes and dialogue that re-positions the viewer queerly within the drama. He pulls the viewing audience into his “fantasia” in order to personally re-connect the dots of our reality.

When in an effort towards queering, an artist adds layers to a familiar subject or situation, he or she is trying to encourage the audience to examine what they understand within the indexical present. This is a demand to risk the familiar identifications of the self. Like Luhmann’s use of the term queer pedagogy, this pushes us away from the normative production of knowable selves towards the “infinite proliferation of new identification” (p.148) within the indexical present. In both Tony Kushner’s use of queering and Susanne Luhmann’s call for a queer pedagogy our focus is shifted towards the interpretation of interactions between authors/ teachers/ text and readers/ students. “Accordingly, pedagogy (and art) then begins to shift from transmission strategies to an inquiry into the conditions for understanding, or refusing, knowledge” (Luhmann 1998, p.151) It is clear for example that the queering provoked by the performance of *Angels in America* demands that we ask not what is a homosexual, but instead what does the one engaging a homosexual story understand differently.

The Difficulty of Knowing, Queer is not Simply Gay

It is important to understand that I am not speaking about the popular use of the term queer. Queer is not simply gay, and things thought to be gay are not merely queer. To say only that a thing is “queer” does not indicate from what this thing is differentiated. “Queer is not only queer; it is not identical with itself. We (homosexuals) are now clear that both what we are and what we are not are implicated in the construction of identity and community” (Pinar, 1998, p. 6). It is obvious that homosexuals are called “queer” because of the behaviors that they do not do as well as that which they do. By its very definition

the term queer must be used to describe that which is unconventional, curious, freakish, eccentric, weird, or not ordinary. However, indicating that something is queer points to what the thing is and at the same time what it is not. Queer is about how something is conventional and how it is not, what is normal and what is a freakish deviation, what is ordinary and what is not.

Queering is a useful device for social criticism because it exposes multiple points of epistemological curiosity within a discourse. Queering reminds us that communication is what will become *known*. *Knowing* is an understanding that arises through a process of identification with and against identity. By juxtaposing what is and what is not, queering fosters a lively search for deeper and deeper positions of understanding. This work is an indication that *knowing* is always difficult.

Knowing requires recognition. Moral, spiritual, institutional, intellectual, sexual, class/race-based, ethnical, and even unofficial commands of knowledge all require (mis)recognition, and this (mis)recognition confers a sense of responsibility to the other. Queering—the inclusion of the other through direct address—reminds us that knowing is not as easy as simply speaking and hearing. “If you think it is easy you are a fool. If you think it is natural you are blind. It is a learned application without reason or motive” (Morrison, 1998, p. 196). These are the phrases that Toni Morrison uses to describe *love*. Yet, this language could also be used to characterize the complexities in the experience of *knowing*.

In her novel, *Paradise*, Morrison (1998) complicates the matter of love by insisting that it is a learned application. She demands that love is not natural or innate; instead it is a diploma that confers the “privilege of expressing love and the privilege of receiving it” (p. 196). Through queering, *knowing* can be characterized as a learned application in which we earn the right to express and accept what is *known*. Through a

practice of queering, an individual learns how to demonstrate their responsibility for what is *known*.

Through queering, students as well as educators are led to reconsider, re-investigate, and re-demonstrate what they thought was familiar about their world. They are led to explore performative engagements in learning. While in the work of performance art students are encouraged to investigate art as interactivity and learning in action. This is the examination of art "as" performance, as a happening only understood in hindsight, as an event that becomes *known* through experience (Apple & Schechner, 1990; Carlson, 1996; McKenzie, 2001; Schechner, 2002; Denzin, 2003). Queering uses performance art not to produce any definitive explanation of performance. Here performance art is used in an active practice of interruption. Queer theory is combined with the ideas and concepts of performance to articulate alternative theories of subjectivity as known through the experience of difference. This is simply a critique of how performances in the classroom are and are not related to one another.

Performance Art: What is it?

I have often mixed the curricular experiences of students with the concepts and ideas of performance art. As will be discussed throughout this paper, performance art makes explicit use of personal experience and direct engagement in order to facilitate the act of relationship building. With *performance pedagogies* the goals of art education are pushed well beyond teaching "non-artists" simply to make art. Performance uses personal experience and classroom knowledge as a vehicle for making connections between students and communities.

In the text, *Performing pedagogy: Toward an art of politics*, Charles Garoian (1999) insists performance art is a medium that is involved directly with the body of the artist and explicitly with their experiences of living in the world. However, he cautions that performance art is

not simply “putting on a show.” Performance artists do their work primarily by making direct connections with the audience and by telling stories with their body. Quoting from Marvin Carlson (1996), Garoian writes:

Performance artists, unlike traditional theatrical performers, ‘do not base their work upon characters previously created by other artists’, but upon their own bodies, their own autobiographies, their own specific experiences in a culture or in the world, made performative by their consciousness of them and the process of displaying them for audiences. (p. 67)

Garoian insists that by using the body of the artist as it’s primary medium, performance art re-invents the process of theatre and other traditional artistic practices. The script, not the body of the artist, is the focus of traditional theatre. In fact, the “show” is the most significant element in a work of traditional theatre. It is expected that a group of people will enter the theatre, other people will move across the stage and tell a story, the first group of people will applaud while the second group accepts this applause as a sign of praise. Then everyone will leave the theatre and go back to their separate homes. There is typically no direct interaction between the actor and audience. In traditional theatre indirect interaction mediates what individuals do and how they tell their stories.

However, performance art grows precisely at the point where the breakdown in a social structure begins. Performance art is the physical expression of the postmodern desire to transgress boundaries, collapse conceptual barriers, intermix disciplines, and re-arrange an accepted social ordering (Schechner, 2002). It is not the creation of a manufactured reality but the facilitation of direct interaction within the reality that exist between the artist and audience, author and reader, or teacher and learner. Educators should use performance to breakdown the safe

and neutral distance between learners and their curriculum. Performance artworks created in the classroom will be constructed within the concert, immediate, and personal relations between the student/artist and his or her viewers/audience.

A Brief History

In the 1960s many artists and educators became excited about the possibility of working with performance. Charles Garoian and Yvonne Gaudelius (2001) believe this enthusiasm grew in tandem with political movements that challenged how patriarchy and capitalism allowed authority figures to oppress dismiss and silence the bodies of individuals outside of the norm. Like the political movements of the sixties, performance art has demonstrated that individuals have the right to fair treatment in the workplace (Molesworth, 2003). It has “shown” that African Americans, Native Americans, and other minorities can be equal and un-separate participants in our legal system and at other spaces of public discourse (Little & O’Brien, 1990). Along with activists, performance artists have created declarations proclaiming the right of women and homosexuals to live in their own skins as *they*, not as the laws of God or man, decide (Carr, 1993; D’Emilio, 2002).

A well-known educator, Allan Kaprow, was one of many artists to introduce performance art into education. He intended to challenge the widely acceptance belief that learning is the passive transmission of knowledge. Since the late fifties, Kaprow has used not only performance art but also other body-centered mediums like *conceptual art* and *happenings* to re-order sites of learning. Kaprow believes the power in the body-centered arts is in how they help participants of a communicative event learn to see themselves in new ways (Kaprow, 1976). These works push the art viewers’ attention beyond our non-interactive and static relationship with objects. Kaprow has always considered the strength of performance art to be the unique way it re-

arranges the exchange between the artist, audience and the society that contains them both (Kwon, 2003).

In art education, performance pedagogies are more than learning experiences about, "Hey, come look at what I made." They provoke much more profound questions, than "Do you want to hang it on your refrigerator door?" "Art as idea, art as action, Conceptual art, Performance art, Happenings, and so on attempt to install alternative models of exchange that counter, complicate or parody the (popular system of education)...The art work in such cases functions as a mechanism to instigate social exchanges or interactions that specifically put into motion a circuit of obligation and reciprocity" (Kwon, 2003, p. 85). In body-centered artworks the interaction with the work itself, the "art exchange," can be harnessed as a site for critical pedagogical investigations.

Performance Art and the Changing Citations of Art Education

In contemporary practices of art education there are fundamental misunderstandings about the *use* of art. These misunderstandings make performance as well as queer theory seem unproductive and even impractical in the classroom. Some believe art is a vehicle to escape the mundane routines of life or a way for individuals to get relief from the complications of daily existence. It is not. Art is an evolving process of awareness about ourselves and the world near us. And, performance art strives for a queered sense of that awareness.

Performance art lifts the invisible partition between the curriculum and public discourse; it urges the reader to write on top of the text; it pushes the listener to sing along, and in the classroom it demands that the text of an artwork not only be displayed but also "played," perceived and read into the lives of students. Where employed, performance art usher its participants into positions where they can *use* this medium to 1) put things together "with meaning" 2)

attend to things in order to understand and explore how others make meaning 3) and make sense of circumstances “through the serious interplay of life and work, by asking attending, and making connections” (Booth, 1997, p. 23). By placing special emphasis on direct address and critical engagement performance art can help learners become actively involved in a meaning-making process.

Fully digesting meaning is a total body experience. Performance art gives learners the opportunity to relate the themes of a lesson to their personal experiences in dynamic and innovative ways. Although performance art is typically considered inappropriate for mainstream teaching practices, it can be very beneficial particularly when incorporated at sites of art education. However, for the art educator who is not willing to become invested in the critical process of engaged pedagogies—a teaching practice that is always “striving to create participatory space for sharing knowledge”—performance art is always going to be a difficult, if not impossible, tool to use effectively (hooks, 1994, p. 15). In my teaching I have combined the direct address of performance art with its necessity for critical engagement to help students queer the interactions between the self and the other.

A queer pedagogy suggests that, rather than finding the self in knowledge and representation, learning is about the process of risking the self (Luhmann, 1998, p 149).

Performing A Road Crossing: A New Site for Classroom Art

It is Friday, 8:30 in the morning on October 9th. I am sitting on Pollock Road between the Carnegie and Willard Building in the middle of Penn State’s main campus. I am trying to remember the day when a student in my Art 100 course, *Concepts and Creations in Visual Art*, invited us here to “see” her final project. That was also a Friday morning. Perhaps that’s why she has come to my mind?

I cannot remember the title of the performance, and I am not even certain what the student's name is. However, I will never forget what she did. Those patterns of movement were so beautiful. This student was a senior nursing major from somewhere in eastern Pennsylvania. Part of her family was from Afghanistan, and in class she was always interested in explorations of otherness. I believe we had discussed the work of Merle Ukeles, Robert Mapplethorpe, Keith Haring, and the art criticism of Lucy Lippard. I remember several minority students in that class were particularly outspoken about representations of otherness at Penn State as well as in popular visual culture. Because of our diverse backgrounds the discussions about interpretations of art were often heated and somewhat decisive. Many of the students, my teaching colleagues (this course was team-taught) and I often became emotionally charged about the different arguments that were being waged.

As I recall, the nursing student did her final studio project right here on Pollock Road. That's right; she performed in the middle of the road. It isn't a heavily traveled road. About seven or eight cars pass down it every five minutes and it is not easily accessible to non-University traffic.

When I first saw the performance, this student was simply standing on the opposite side of the road. She was slightly hunched over with her shoulders rounded, and her head was hanging straight towards the ground. I was walking down the sidewalk in front of the library about fifty feet away. That was all I could see and I don't remember hearing anything at that point.

Once I came directly across from the student, from the other side of road I could then see what was *happening*. Her face was hidden. Her long straight black hair was covering it. Her eyes were looking straight down. At first, I thought she was standing at the edge of the cross walk. Then I realize, she was in fact walking into the cross walk. The performer

was walking so slowly that she appeared to be standing still. Her steps were no longer than her big toe, and she never picked up either foot. She let each drag as she walked.

I walked across the road and joined a small crowd that had gathered behind her on the sidewalk. In the crowd was about twenty of her classmates and about that same number of other students that I didn't recognize. We each stood in silence just watching the nursing student. Maybe we were waiting for something to *happen*. After five minutes, a female student, faculty or staff member approached the girl who was performing. By now she was five or six feet into the crosswalk. The lady asked, "Can I help you? Do you need some help? Here, let me help you!"

The performer never stopped taking those tiny steps. She never turned her face towards the woman who was speaking. My student simply raised her left forearm. She slowly bent her arm at the elbow until it was parallel with the road. Then, with her palm facing down she slightly turned the forearm towards the lady who was asking, no insisting on helping. Together they both crossed the road, but the performer never changed the length or tempo of her steps. It took them roughly ten more minutes to cross. When the woman who was "helping" decided that my student had safely crossed far enough, she dropped her hand, letting the performer's forearm fall back to her side, took a few seconds to look at the girl who was still taking tiny steps, shook her head, and walked up the side walk toward the library. The woman who was "helping" looked back every so often until she was out of sight.

During those ten minutes of crossing, the time to change classes had occurred. Now behind the performer on the sidewalk, a large number of people had amassed. There must have been about one hundred people standing on the sidewalk just watching the performer cross the road. As the crowd had grown the people started talking to

each other, "What's she doing? What is happening?" "I don't know. Some lady is crossing the street, but she's walking real slow." "What's wrong?" "It's probably art or something!" "Is she sick?" "Is she blind?" "What's wrong with her?" No one from the large crowd came to offer the performer "help."

No one walked closer to see what was happening. The performer never spoke, looked or even gestured towards the crowd or any of the people walking and standing near her. She kept taking those tiny steps across the road and the crowd just stood there watching.

The pattern continued for about forty-five minutes. Each time the performer got to the other side she would turn and walk back across the road. It seemed like her steps coming back towards us were faster and slightly longer, but once again I couldn't be sure. There was only one break in the pattern that I can remember. It occurred when the performer stopped dead in the center of the cross walk. Her back was still hunched, her long hair was still hanging straight down, and her shoulders were rounded. At this point the performer turned her head slowly and looked at a boy who was sitting perpendicular to the crosswalk in his jeep, waiting.

The boy in the jeep looked at her, looked to his left at the crowd on the sidewalk, looked at the performer again, and then shook his head. He kept doing this until the girl was "safely" away from the front of his jeep. Then he drove off.

Not long after the encounter with the boy in the jeep, a male student from our studio class walked over to the performer, and without saying a word, firmly took her hand and they both walked across the road more quick and deliberately. This student was from Nigeria and he was partially sighted though legally blind. To this day however I have no idea why that student walked with the performer in such an abrupt and deliberate fashion.

As the blind boy and the performer cross the road, she walked straight to the lawn on the side. He guided her head as she quickly collapsed into the grass. The crowd cleared away. And I walked back to our studio classroom, and waited quietly, for something to “happen.”

Detours, Accidents, Mistakes and Performances

How should performing of a road crossing be critiqued? What is the relationship of this performance to other works of art? What happens when we start discussing an act as simple as crossing the road as art? And, how can an event so fleeting even be discussed? How does this work “help” the world?

What makes a work of art “work” and why? This is perhaps a more useful question for critiques of performance art in the classroom. Matthew Goulish, a writer and performer with the Chicago-based group, Goat Island, (2000) insists that the infinite possibilities for existence can always be found somewhere within any work. This leads to a more pedagogically useful thesis than simply asking what is or is not a work of art. A discussion about the infinite possibilities of existence introduces very unconventional conversations into the classroom. Yet, because art education is wedded to the common concerns of education, it is extremely difficult to sustain open dialogues about what becomes known at sites of work that are not controlled by the teacher. Britzman (1998) suggests that educators might learn from artists how to maintain open dialogues about the evolving process of *knowing*:

Unlike educators, they (artists) seem to proffer only their dreams for interpretation, and then no guarantee. They are interested in the mistakes, the accidents, the detours, and the unintelligibilities of identities. Unlike educators, they gesture to their own constructedness and frailties, troubling the space between representation and the real, between the wish and the need. They explore the twilight of the experience in which every reading of the body is a misreading and every search for self leads to the

other. They refuse the simple and moralistic romance that we in education call “self-esteem,” “role models,” and “childhood innocence.” The artists are not the invisible hand that centers the child... The artists asks us to think the unthought of difference and to imagine that communities are something to do, something to make. And with these insistences, none of which offer any guarantees, perhaps education can begin. (p.60)

Looking back at my student’s performance I can see that as a teacher I was uncomfortable responding to the infinite possibilities of existence. I was not able to follow through on the responsibility for meaning-making to emerge in our class dialogue. The performance of crossing the road demanded that our attention be focused on “the mistakes, the accidents, the detours, and the unintelligibilities of identities,” but at the time I was not able to lead the students towards this type of engagement. Following the performance of the road crossing there was only a short amount of time reminding in our class period. All the students seemed deeply moved by the performance, but to be honest no one offered very interesting comments for critique. This was the last day of school, and I decided to end our class simply with a round of applause. Then, just like the end of a play, we each left the art studio and went to our separate homes.

Conclusion

Performance makes the terms of our relationships with subjects explicit. In the sight of performance we are able to see, re-arrange, and re-perform these relationships. Like knowing, seeing our relations to the other is also difficult. Many educators avoid having significant conversations about the relations between and among themselves, the curriculum and the students. However queering encourages educators to explore how bodies are implemented within the performative engagements of reading a work. Queering leads to conversations of

how identities are taken up or refused (Luhmann,1998). Again, curriculum research in art education must help us to re-consider the classroom as a site where the uncertain process of perception can become a key component in understanding learning. Performance art can play an important role in this research. In performance art, understanding *is* evolving.

What is at stake is the responsibility that comes with the acknowledgement of our (mis)recognition. In performance the whole business of knowing becomes linked to a radical form of reading where “identity might be encountered as ‘never identical to itself’ and hence located however partially and provincially, in that queer space and the after thought of (mis)recognition. A queer pedagogy is not concerned with getting identities right or even having them represented as an end in themselves” (Britzman, 1998, p.94). Queering reframes the sociality of education as a communicative event grounded in subject formation. These concerns require new pedagogical goals. Teachers “will have to prepare themselves not so much with gathering more knowledge, but with making experiments that can tolerate the trajectories of learning, the detours made in social encounters, the misrecognitions that invoke or stall reality and pleasure testing and the workings and anxiety in education. Perhaps most difficult, educators will have to assume the position of philosophers and ethnographers and allow the idea that knowledge can be more than certainty, authority, and stability” (Britzman 2000, p. 51)

My student’s performance of crossing the road was an attempt to include the other in the sight of the self. This performance strove to make the context of our shared reality visible, but at the time I was not able to respond. Yet, looking back, it is clear that this performance was a search not for good readers, well-behaved listeners or even responsive teachers. This performance was a call for active participation *in conversation* with my students.

Notes

¹ This idea is a reference to Adrian Piper's notion of *indexical present*. In an essay, "Xenophobia and the Indexical Present" (1990) Piper explains that her performance work is constructed within the concrete, immediate, and personal relations between her and the viewer. She identifies this space as the indexical present.

² The title of Tony Kushner's seven hour play that is written in two parts is *Angels in America: A Gay Fantasia on National Themes. Part One: Millennium Approaches*. (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1993) and *Part Two: Perestroika* (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1994).

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